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OCTOBER 1938

MAGAZINE

GUNSMOKE OUTCAST

EPIC NOVELETTE OF AN OLD WEST KILLER

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

SHAW • CONDO • FOX

THE GAMBLER HELL SENT BACK

A THRILLING TOWN-TAMER NOVELETTE

by RAY HAFZIGER

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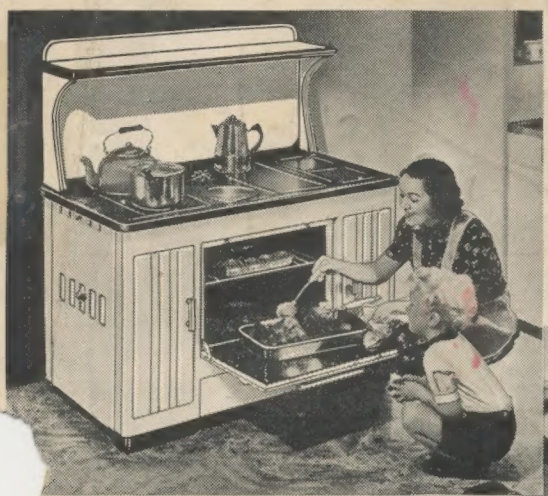

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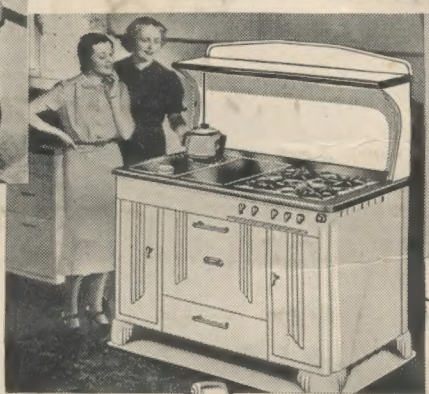

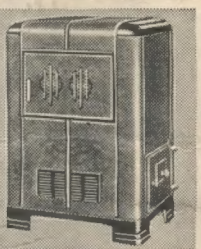

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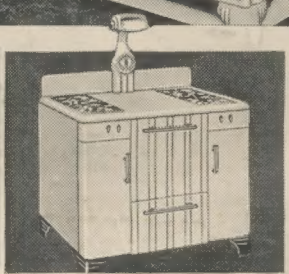

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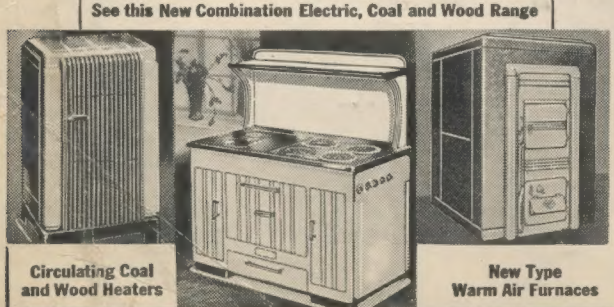

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Ace-High Magazine

Vol. LXXXII, No. 4 CONTENTS October, 1938

Complete Western Novel

THE ZP TURNCOAT RIDES TO BATTLE . . C. K. Shaw **6**

How could old Zeb Pike, stiff-necked defender of his great ZP ranch, know that his own son would sell his guns to the same range-wolf legion that had marked Zeb for a lonely grave—and the spread he loved for their lawless rendezvous?

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ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS!**

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HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY—I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.
IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?
TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT

TOM'S RIGHT—AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES
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THANKS!

I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME RADIO JOB NOW—AND A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

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"When I had completed the first twenty lessons I had obtained my license as Radio Broadcast Operator and immediately joined the staff of WMPC, where I am now chief operator." — HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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The Trail Breakers

CIVILIZATION moves on. An aviator flies around the world in less than four days. A celebrated scientist announces that he can keep the various organs of the human body alive by purely artificial means. A gigantic, fabulous man-built dam rises out of the wilderness to bring water to hundreds of thousands of acres of arid wasteland.

Will there come a time when man has no more frontiers to conquer? They thought that time was near at hand for America back in the Seventies, when the railroads pushed across the continent to the Pacific Coast. Cattlemen predicted it when the nesters and grangers started pouring in with barbwire. But the years that followed brought new frontiers.

It is conceivable that the confining web of civilization may some day close around all of America. But that day is a long way off, by present indications. The West, for all the efforts of the road-builders and the local Chambers of Commerce, has vast areas today that are as wild, as restless, as reckless as they were in the first days of discovery. And it will take more than engineers and laboratory scientists to change them. It will take a sweeping change in the heart of man.

If there comes a day when man no longer hears the challenge of untamed frontiers, we pray to heaven that we may not be here to see it. This nation's growth has been keyed to the pioneer tradition. We thrill to stories of the Old West, to the ringing deeds of the trail-breakers. Their example is our proud heritage.

And we will not let them down. A ghostly cavalcade of unvanquished men, armed with long rifles and garbed in homespun, watches over us, pointing the way. Our hearts hear their inspiring message: "Courage! Onward—never lag! Ahead lies the land of promise!"

Ace-High, dedicated to the undying glory of those noble stalwarts, pledges to keep alive the western pioneers' inspiring, thrilling memory. Civilization moves on—and we move with it, in the courageous footsteps of the Old West's valiant fighting men!

—THE EDITOR.

DON'T BUY RINGS *or* REBORE IF CAR WASTES OIL *and* GAS

Miner's Amazing Mineral Discovery Saves Up to 95% of New Ring and Rebore Costs—If Worn Rings and Cylinders are Wasting Oil and Gas Send Coupon Below for FREE SAMPLE

TAKES PLACE OF NEW RINGS AND REBORE!

Over a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Tested and acclaimed by editors of motor publications.

Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

WHY PAY UP TO $151.37 For New Rings and Reboring?

If worn rings and cylinders cause your car to be an oil and gas eater—before you spend a lot of money, try Ovrhaul. Give it an opportunity to do for you what it has done for thousands of others. Here are costs of new rings and rebore on a few 1935 models:

Make	Cost of New Rings and Rebore	Time of Car Tie-up
Chevrolet	$50.00	2 days
De Soto	62.50	2 days
Dodge	59.20	2 days
Ford $50 to	65.00	2 days
Buick	80.00	2½ days
Cadillac	151.37	2 days

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Let us send you L. H. Smith's complete report which shows that the compression of a badly worn 6-cylinder motor was increased 82.4% and brought back to within .09 points of its original new car efficiency. Such tests conclusively prove the sensational merits of Ovrhaul.

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Ovrhaul works on the mineral plating principle—No special tools needed. No car tie-up. No danger of ruining motor by grinding cylinder walls—works in while you drive—saves you time and money. Gives you months of extra car use. A single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

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Sales of Ovrhaul have been phenomenal. Hundreds of Salesmen and Distributors in the United States and abroad. Biggest money-maker in years. Advertising in Saturday Evening Post and 150 other national magazines carry the astounding message of Ovrhaul. The market has barely been scratched. To wide-awake men we offer opportunity—an opportunity which may never come your way again. A fast selling, repeating article, fully protected by U. S. and foreign patents. Saves motorists millions of dollars, *Ovrhaul Sells for Less Than Spark Plugs.* Exclusive territories still open—but you must act quick if you want in on this.

Phone, Write or Wire TODAY!

Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you, with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today.

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., OVRHAUL CO., K-910, Los Angeles, Calif.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY!

SAMPLE FREE!

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to $151.37 for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated and full details of a real money-making opportunity. ***Air mail reaches us overnight.***

Free SAMPLE COUPON

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Without cost or obligation, rush me FREE SAMPLE. Also show me your big money-making plan.

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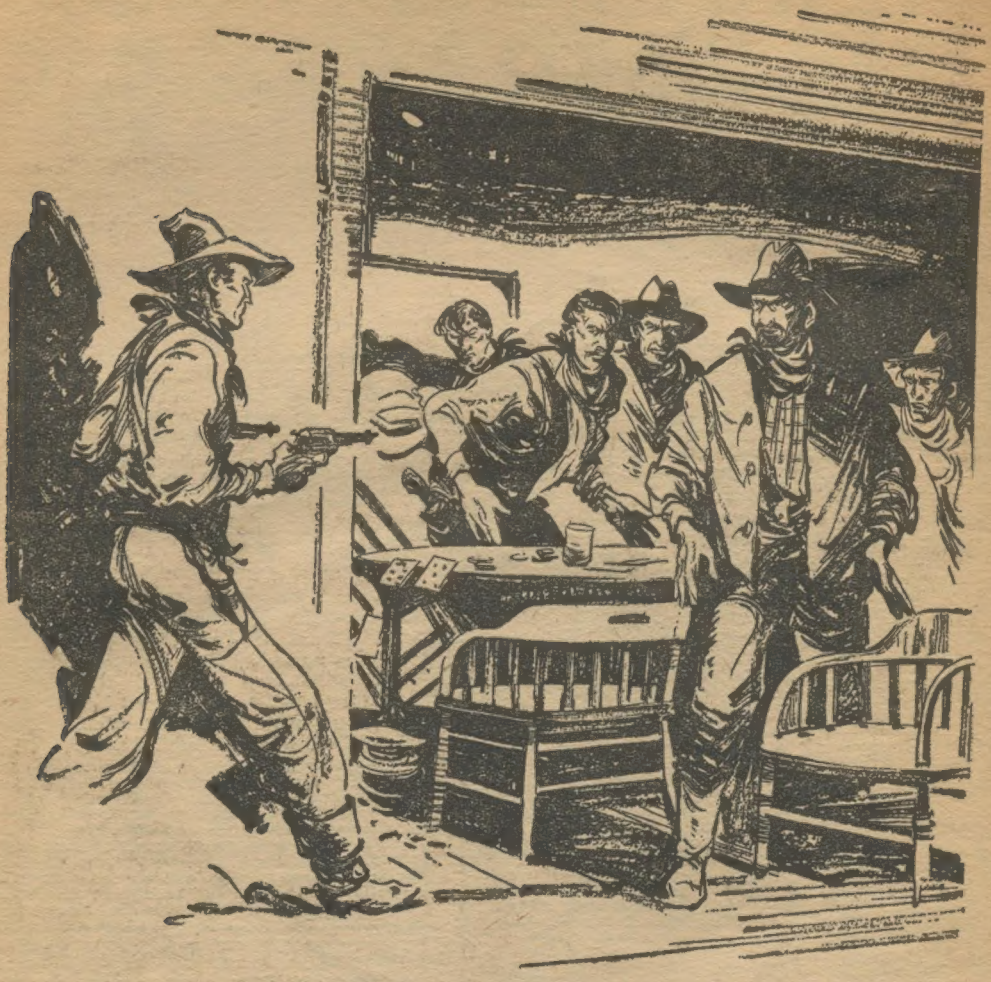
THE ZP TURNCOAT



With a belt full of shells and a boom that echoed across Cow Mountain, old Zeb Pike held his free-land ZP range. . . . Only one man, his soft-spoken son, could smash his inviolate boundary. But how could Zeb know that his own boy Clay would sell his gun to the first enemy who knew its fearsome price?

CHAPTER ONE

Seed for the Cain Harvest

"FIRST come first served" was the law of the range up around Crooked River, and by its terms Zeb Pike held the vast acreage of the ZP ranch. His land reached south from Three Mountains Creek to the Little Deschutes in the Cowhorn country. . . His rights had been established for thirty years, and men respected them—until the coming of Tom Grant.

Grant set up the Half Triangle T north of Three Mountains Creek, and grazed his herds to the east. But he wanted the choice acres lying south of the boundary line. And as the managing partner for wealthy old Alex Lancing, he had money to fight for what he wanted.

Tom Grant was no fool. Before bringing the fight out into the open, he was

RIDES TO BATTLE

By C. K. SHAW

"Stand back, you fellows!" Clay Pike's guns dominated the room.

A smashing novel of Western range-war

smart enough to weigh carefully the odds against him—and all the possible means of reducing those odds.

When Tom Grant finally talked things over with Ed Beck, his gunman, he began with young Clay Pike. Clay was slight of build, and that was hard to get used to in a Pike. His older brother, Ferd, could throw an ox over his shoulder and climb Cow Mountain. But what Clay lacked in brawn, he made up for in his tapered muscles and in the easy swing of his gun arm.

As a youngster, Ferd had taught him to ride, rope and figure cows, but nobody had had to teach Clay to handle a gun. At eighteen, he still moved in Ferd's shadow. He was proud of his brother's strength. He was proud to walk down the street between Zeb and Ferd. He

loved the old ZP as much as they, and he hated Tom Grant, only he didn't put it into words. He couldn't roar in regular Pike fashion; he waited quietly for the big fight to break, with his guns low and ready on his hip. . .

"He can whip a gun faster'n a bat can leave hell," Grant reminded Ed Beck. "He's a gunnie, slick as silk. Let old Zeb and Ferd roar 'til they're hoarse, but watch that kid. We'll be trampin' sod down on your face if you don't."

Beck smiled. "I ain't afraid of the kid, but I'm not takin' any fool chances with him. Ferd can bellow like a cyclone in a cave, but it's the kid that's the ZP's ace in the hole." He spoke the next words slowly, speculatively. "Had you ever thought, Grant, that the kid might be weaned away?"

"You musta been eatin' loco weed, Beck," Grant snapped. "The kid ain't got the Pike build, but he's a Pike at heart. Might as well try to move old Zeb over to our side."

"Clay Pike is in love with your wife's niece," Ed Beck said, unstirred by Grant's sharpness. "They've been meeting lately, so I heard today from Tanny's boy. He's seen them ridin' away from the cottonwood flats more than once. We might sling the girl at him and wait to step into the gap when old Zeb finds out."

Tom Grant was thinking straight to the point. His lids squinted lower and lower over his narrow-set eyes. The plan took shape.

"We'll have to watch out for Ferd," he said huskily. "Old Zeb might rear up and throw the kid out, but Ferd's always almighty fast at defendin' anything the kid does."

"Yeah, Ferd is the one to watch, that he don't patch things up." Beck's thin lips pulled back in a smile. "It'd be a great stroke, Grant, weanin' the Pikes from their gunpower."

Tom Grant swore. "I believe we can do it, Beck. A woman can sure play hell with a man. Old Zeb Pike will paw the air when he hears his son is sweet on my wife's niece. I'll kinda let the kid know I ain't so narrow. That will be the starter."

CLAY PIKE entered the Sanderson District schoolhouse at Blue Bluffs with Ferd and three ZP punchers. The kid weighed less than the others, but he was not overshadowed. As they walked to the nails at the back wall to leave their hats, Ferd was a step in advance, but he always kept a step in advance of every man save old Zeb himself.

Ferd looked over the crowd, then spoke sharply to Sanderson. Sanderson replied that they couldn't keep Tom Grant from coming to the school supper. It had been advertised for the whole dern country, hadn't it? He was nervous in thus far failing to agree with Ferd Pike.

"We won't stay long," Ferd told Clay. "If the Grants are here for supper—we ain't."

Clay wasn't listening. He didn't even pretend to listen, and that was unusual. He split through the crowd and walked straight up to Martha Runion, niece of Tom Grant's wife. The girl saw him coming, and her eyes and lips smiled. The fiddles were tuning up. Park Honer tucked his bandana under his chin, lifted his fiddle and struck out on the opening waltz. Clay paused before the girl, and she rose and slipped her hand through his arm.

Martha Runion was seventeen, and slim and straight as a young tree. Her black hair was coiled low at her neck, almost severely drawn away from her clean-cut features. Her lips were the eager, responsive tools of youth, her eyes fluttery as her breath. There was the joy of living and loving in her whole face, yet as you studied her you saw

something else. In the softness of her curving lips there was strength, in the sparkle of her eyes there was a sleeping power. Martha Runion had drawn from ancestors who had both loved and fought.

She was a head shorter than Clay, and as they danced she looked up to him and spoke. "Uncle Tom has found out about us, Clay. He came near not letting me come tonight, but Aunt Tildy and I asked him as a special favor."

"Was that 'special' because of me, Martha?" Her eyes had already answered the question, but he wanted to hear her say it.

"Wouldn't 'most any girl think it was special to be asked to supper with Clay Pike? Uncle Tom will storm when he sees us at supper together—still he did admit you were a man a woman could trust." The last was added in puzzled tones.

Clay lost a step in the waltz. "Are you sure he said that, Martha?"

She nodded briefly. "Clay, I hope Uncle Tom is better than most folks think. I hope so for Aunt Tildy. I hope it's the worry of the times that is making him so cross to her. He is her whole life, Clay." She tried to smile and speak in a lighter vein. "There, I've burdened you with all my worries."

"Isn't that right? We're going to be married as soon as I get a few more cows under my brand and pa gives me that west section."

She looked up at him as they walked toward her seat on the bench. "I hope everything goes as we plan, Clay."

"It will," he said. There wasn't any of the Pike roar in the quiet promise, but it brought relief to the girl's eyes.

She looked past him as she sat down, and her smile died.

Clay turned then to face Ferd Pike.

"Come outside," Ferd ordered.

From a corner of the room, Tom Grant saw the play. . .

CLAY followed, but his flesh was crawling at memory of the tones. Ferd's anger had been under poor control. It had run sharp and poisonous, through those two curt words.

At the fence where they had tied their horses, Ferd swung on him. "We're goin'," he snapped. "Come on, straddle leather."

Clay stood motionless.

"I said straddle leather! Are you tied to the ground?"

"Ferd, we come for the dance and supper—"

"And you made a damn fool outa the Pikes by dancin' with Marthy Runion, lookin' at her like you was a calf stuck in the mud."

"Dancing with Martha Runion never made a fool outa no man."

Ferd stepped up close; Clay could feel the electric tension of his big body. "Maybe you're in love with Tom Grant's niece," he said.

"I am."

The words ripped the cover from Ferd's anger. "You poor brayin' jackass! You simperin'—"

Clay's cool voice cut into his heavy tones. "If you're going home, Ferd, split the breeze. I'm staying to take Martha Runion to supper."

He spun away and left his brother in the shadow of the horses. Never before had he and Ferd quarreled in earnest. As he reached the three steps leading up to the schoolhouse, a weakness flooded him. That terribly quiet figure back there in the shadow of the horses was Ferd, who had taught him to ride and rope, who had taught him damn near everything worth while.

As he stood there, there rose before him the picture of Ferd with a broken arm when Clay had been eight. They had both just been thrown from a horse. And Clay had cried with a skinned knee. Ferd had

taken him under his good arm and carried him to the house.

Clay was inside, standing at the back of the room, when Martha's fingers touched his arm. "Clay, did you quarrel with Ferd?"

He nodded. "He wanted me to leave."

"You must find him and talk it out. Maybe it would be best to leave with Ferd. Go now, Clay!" The strength that had laid behind the sparkle in her eyes was now uppermost.

His voice was quiet as he answered her. "You stood up to your uncle, Martha. You came tonight to go to supper with me, and I'm here to take you."

Her fingers tightened on his arm, their glances locked. "I wish you'd go with Ferd," she whispered. "There's already trouble between the ZP and Half Triangle T. This will fan the flames." Her eyes were dark with a fear she could not put into words.

He took her hands in both of his. "I'm through with hiding my love, Martha. I want the whole world to know." He drew her toward the dancers on the floor, and holding her close, they glided into a two-step.

Grant, standing in the doorway, laughed under his breath as he nudged his gunman. "A woman can make a fool outa the most of 'em, but it takes Tom Grant to make a fool outa a woman."

CHAPTER TWO

Lone Trail for an Outcast

A LIGHT was burning in the ZP ranchhouse as Clay rode home from the schoolhouse supper. A winded horse was standing in the yard, with reins dragging. It was the big dun always ridden by Emmet Moyer, one of the ZP top-hands. It was plain he had just arrived. Men making rapid rides in the night, with range conditions tight as a fiddle string, probably meant trouble.

Clay unsaddled before he went to the house. His feet grew heavy as he walked up the familiar trail. Ferd would be waiting there, and Ferd would have told the old man of the quarrel. He was glad his dad and brother knew of his love for Martha Runion, but tonight looked like a bad time for talking. That lathered horse in the yard made him uneasy.

As Clay entered the room, Emmet Moyer was talking. Emmet was a good cowman, had bossed a herd up the trail in top shape, but he was the only man on the ZP payroll that the kid didn't like. It seemed the fellow's eyes could never be nailed to steadiness. They were shifting now as he talked.

"Ferd and me both know you ain't lyin' when you say you took a moonlight ride over that Three Mountains range tonight, but we couldn't swear to it in no court, 'cause we both was seen jammin' around the schoolhouse and Blue Bluffs. I ain't doubtin' your word fer a holy minute, Zeb, but the country knows you quarreled with Alex Lancing. And now tonight he's been murdered. He's the feller puttin' up the dinero fer Tom Grant to fight you, and you're the only gent in the country that'd benefit by his death. —"

Zeb Pike roared him to silence. "You mean to say that folks that have known me for thirty years are goin' to believe I'd plank a bullet into Lancing's back and drag his body through a couple of wire fences into a marsh! And just because you see a few scratches on my boots—"

Emmet Moyer cut in again. "The folks will all stick fer your innocence if a crooked sheriff don't build a case against you. I'm sayin' let me hide them boots in the hay loft."

Ferd straightened from examining his father's boots. They were scratched deep and many times, in about the way that the barbs of a fence would have done

as a man crawled through dragging a burden.

Old Zeb's voice again swept everything before it. "I don't know how them scratches come on my boots, but I ain't tuckin' my tail between my legs like a whipped dog on accounta them!"

"Emmet is right, Pa," Ferd said, his lips tightening on every word. "Them scratches looks hard to explain. Since you don't remember how they come there, you better let me hide 'em. You can wear the old pair that hurts your foot where the calf stepped on it. Grant would certainly make a big story outa them scratched boots."

Old Zeb thought it over, frosty brows pulled together over his stormy eyes, then spun about to the three-feet-high wainscot running around the room. A quick push of his thumb slid back a panel, disclosing a closet some four feet long. He hauled and jerked at the boots.

"I'll stick 'em in there," he rumbled, and disgust for the move was in his voice.

Clay's spurs tinkled softly as he shifted. The location of that closet had always been a secret. He wished now that Emmet Moyer did not know of it—or of the scratches on the boots. He watched the scene in silence, for neither Ferd or old Zeb had acknowledged his presence. Zeb Pike was speaking again.

"I quarreled with Alex Lancing, yes. It was the first time I'd seen him since he come on from Salt Lake. I told him how Tom Grant was skinnin' him alive. And by the almighty hills, I made him see it! It wasn't me that wanted him out of the way—it was Tom Grant!"

Emmet Moyer hesitated at the door, his head coming forward at that last remark. Old Zeb waved him on out. The owner of the ZP was now ready to deal with his youngest son. He was looking the young man over slowly, from brows to toes.

MOYER stepped into the night and closed the door behind him. Through Clay's active brain ran the thought that the ZP puncher's footsteps had not carried away from the porch. But the next second his mind was jerked to another subject. Old Zeb was roaring at him.

"So you figure you're in love with Tom Grant's niece! Well, you ain't. Hear me, you ain't. I've stood for a lot of things offen you because you take after your mother's folks, but I ain't standin' for this. It's time you started thinkin' like a Pike. I ain't havin' you in love with no woman from the Half Triangle T!"

Clay Pike went white before his father's rage. The old man saw him lose color and his lips pulled into a sneer of contempt. Ferd saw the kid quivering and his big hands worked nervously. That dead-white look wasn't the way to face a fight—not the Pike way.

Then the kid's voice came, low and even: "I guess Ferd told you I'm not giving up Martha Runion. If he didn't, I'm telling you now."

The old man reached out a hand twice the size of Clay's. "Shut up that talk. You'll do what I say, and I say, 'stay away from that girl!' "

"I'll do what you say in other things—not that."

Clay was cold now, and there was no quivering in his face.

Ferd looked at the kid who meant more to him than anything on earth, and there was almost warmth in his glance. If only Clay wasn't on the wrong side!

"I order you to stay away from the Half Triangle T and never to speak to that girl again!" Old Zeb's wrath was at white heat.

"I'm seeing Martha tomorrow night," Clay said.

Zeb Pike's thick arms fell to his sides. He looked his son over inch by inch, flaying him, scorning him. "If you see

that girl tomorrow night, I'll horsewhip you! Hear me, I'll hide you with a bull whip! No son of mine is goin' to be led around by a girl Tom Grant plants in his path!"

"Martha Runion isn't planted by Tom Grant!" Fire spit through the ice in the kid's eyes.

Zeb's laugh banged against the ceiling. "There ain't no angels stayin' under Grant's roof. You keep from that house 'less you want the skin clipped offen your back with a bull whip. Me and Ferd will show you how a Pike handles them of the blood that ain't got gumption enough to handle themselves."

Ferd winced as his dad's threat rumbled out a second time. But that slight reaction had passed when the kid turned on him a slow, cold glance.

"Lay the whip on me, huh?" he asked them both. "Let me warn you, you better change your minds."

He turned and walked to the door leading into the hall.

Ferd and old Zeb looked at each other as his footsteps echoed and died. He had gone to his room with even, measured stride. Zeb began pacing the floor, and with each step the table vibrated. Ferd stood like a stone man, all but his eyes. They lived, and as the seconds passed, the flame in their depths crept closer to the surface.

He looked at the old man and spoke. "I'm dad-gummed proud of the kid."

"Proud!" Zeb swung on him. "Proud! The—the . . ." His rumble gave out. "Why dang your skin, Ferd, you never doubted Clay, did you?"

"I'd lick any feller that hinted it. I was just sayin' I was prideful of the way he took your beller."

The old man's eyes lighted beneath his frosty brows. "I've alus been prideful of the little cuss. And when this range war busts, he's goin' to fill a pair of Pike boots that neither you or me could fill. Prideful! Why dang your skin, put a gun in his hand and he's dangerous as the back door of hell. That's one more reason we can't let him make any mistake about where he stands."

THE next morning, breakfast almost choked Clay Pike, but he ate it to the last crumb. With the eyes of Ferd and old Zeb upon him, he couldn't show himself a weakling.

Emmet Moyer brushed close to him as they left the house for the horse corral. The fellow was making one of his rare attempts at conversation. He said Blue Bluffs was hot over the killing of Alex Lancing and had sent to Prineville for the sheriff. He seemed worried for the spot old Zeb was in. Clay answered him briefly, and was aware again of his dislike for the man.

The day dragged by slowly as Clay rode his section of Three Mountains Creek. He kept a sharp lookout for Half Triangle T cows, as Tom Grant had made his brags that he was sending a herd across the deadline. He watched for cows, but his thoughts were on the bitter words that had passed between him and his father and brother. Even the thought of seeing Martha in a few hours could not wash the taste of that quarrel from his mouth.

Never since he had been able to walk the distance to the barn, had he been uncertain of Ferd's support. Never until now. The old man had come rearing up on his kind legs many a time, but Ferd had always taken Clay's side. On more than one occasion, when it looked like a whipping for Clay, Ferd had swung him up before him on the saddle for a ride. Now he had quarreled with Ferd. The big fellow had saddled his horse in silence, his eyes straight ahead, and he had ridden to the day's work without a word.

Clay was late for supper. The others

had washed and were half through their meal when he entered. The conversation died down as if a wet blanket had been spread. The kid again ate his regular amount of food. Zeb and Ferd were smoking as he pushed back from the table and went to his room to change his clothes.

He could have left the house by the front way, when he was ready to ride for the Half Triangle T, and thereby escaped the eyes of Ferd and the old man. But he didn't do it. He walked through the room where they sat and left by the side door, as was his habit. Neither of them looked up, or missed a puff on their pipes, but they must have felt his eyes upon them. He paused with one hand on the knob for a second, then passed into the twilight.

MARTHA was waiting for him at the big pine, and when he rounded the bend she rode to meet him. Her eyes flew fearfully over his face, and came back to meet his steady glance.

"You shouldn't have come, Clay. I told you I'd understand if you weren't here."

They walked their horses back to the pine and dismounted. They dropped the reins and sat down on a flat boulder half buried in the hill side.

"You've been crying, Martha," he said. "What is it?"

"It's Uncle Tom—Clay, I hate him!" The words burst from her lips as though she could no longer lock them back. "He's cruel to Aunt Tildy, and this morning he struck her."

He held her tense hands. "Tom Grant has a lot on his mind," he said. More slowly, he added, "At least he isn't trying to run your life for you."

She understood that he was thinking of his own father, and shuddered at the flatness of the tones.

"Aunt Tildy worships him," she said. "Poor Aunty Tildy, she's a plain woman, and tired and drab from hard work. Tom Grant wants a woman with a freshness about her, and beauty and land and cows. He hates Aunt Tildy for being in his way."

Clay Pike nodded. "The widow of Ranny Beardsley—I've heard the talk. She's got a good ranch and it's well stocked. I guess there's plenty that call her pretty."

"She rides up to the door and takes him away to talk over some problem, with a breezy smile and the devil in her black eyes. She says he is helping her so much in straightening out her husband's affairs. Aunt Tildy watches them go, with no life in her face. You see, Clay, she never had a child, it's been just Tom Grant for eighteen years."

The shadows thickened about them. The girl leaned closer to him, and her low brittle tones went on. She was afraid of many things on the Half Triangle T. Men rode up quietly in the dead of night, whispered and rode away. Sometimes they met in low conversation in the office, and the blinds would be tightly drawn and the door closed.

When the time had come for him to go, she pressed her damp cheek to his and begged him to be careful. He held her close and kissed her and tried to build up the failing courage in her trembling body.

He rode slowly toward home, troubled by the things Martha had told him. Tildy Grant was a large, flat-chested woman with strength in her face and devotion for Tom Grant in her eyes. He was sorry for her.

He neared the crossing of Horse Creek without giving a thought to the black lane formed by the brush that extended back from its bank. His thoughts were as deep and still as the shadows. Too late, the evil of the spot hit him.

A man reared a horse out upon him and swung a clubbed gun. It descended along his skull. His clutching fingers

grazed the horn. He lurched low in the saddle. The clubbed weapon struck home a second time, and Clay Pike slid from his horse. He hit the ground a dead weight, and yet he was dimly aware that a second man and horse were on the scene.

He was jerked to his feet and held from behind by one pair of hands. Another set of hands went over him for guns. Then came the whir of a blacksnake. The thick, heavy whip wrapped around his middle and sent him sprawling to the sand. That whip cut his shoulders, his back, his legs. He dug his fingers into the earth, the terrible pain dragging him partly from the daze of the first blow on his head. It wrapped about him and bit into his stomach as he blindly climbed to hands and knees. Once the slim lash at the end cut across his cheek. No spot on his body was spared.

The whip rose and fell until his fingers no longer had the strength to clutch at the sand. He was a lifeless bloody mass without the strength to lift his face. He lay like a beaten dog. He didn't know when they left, yet as he tried weakly to sit up, he knew he had heard horses pounding south.

"They rode south," he whispered, trying to drag himself to the creek. The ZP ranch lay south. He crumpled down in the road and lost count of time or space.

A LONE rider came galloping to the crossing from the opposite side, trotted his horse across, and swore sharply as the animal shied at the object in the road. Clay roused as cold water struck his face, and his flesh crawled at the thought of a stranger finding him thus. Word would go over the country of the cow-hiding that had been given Clay Pike. Through swollen lips he told the fellow to ride on to his business.

The man dragged him to a patch of moonlight, cursed when he saw who it was. Then his curses dried on his lips. He had taken a few steps toward his horse at recognizing Clay, but he turned back.

"Damned if I can leave even a cattle-poisonin' Pike to lay like that. My good Samaritan blood don't cover you Pikes, but you been beat to a pulp. 'Tain't human to beat a man like this." He looked down at the youth, who had pulled himself to his knees and was making feeble attempts to get on his feet. "Damn it, it ain't human! Guns is quick and to the point, and may the best man stay on top the sod 'stead of six feet under. I ain't got no objection to stoppin' a gent's clock, but leavin' him dragging his hind parts this way is plumb against my morals. Pike, if Tom Grant done this to you, I'm through with takin' his pay. Did Pike do this, counta you sparkin' the niece?"

The man was Ed Beck, Grant's ace gunnie. He was leaning toward the kid, waiting tensely for an answer. Clay saw his face as the glancing rays of the moon revealed it. The silver of moonlight is softening, and it did its work well as it eased the cunning light from Beck's eyes.

"Grant didn't do this job," Clay Pike said bitterly.

Beck squatted on his heels and gave the kid a swig of whiskey. He helped him to his feet, then left him to stand alone. He could feel the bruised body straining away from him.

"I'm glad it wasn't Grant," he said. "Tom's hard as nails, but I didn't figure him for a job like this or I wouldn't a-hooked up with him. Seems like your horse is gone, Pike. I'll give you a leg up on mine."

Clay tried to think clearly. Pain was wracking his body from the wounds, and pain was shooting through his heart. Ferd and the old man had carried out their threat. They had beaten him within

an inch of his life and left him like a bleeding coyote.

Ed Beck was speaking again. "Whoever beat you this way and left you crawlin' with your face in the sand sure hated you plenty, Pike. Maybe your dad heard about—"

The kid drew on a burst of strength. "Whoever done it don't concern you, Beck—don't concern nobody but me!"

Elation oiled Beck's voice when he answered. "It's your own funeral, Pike. Just consider I never spoke. But you can't be left here. I'm ridin' back to my line camp. There's nobody around there. I'll take you up behind me."

The kid was afoot, and his body was pain-ridden, yet he showed no appreciation. "Why do you offer to help me, Beck?" he asked. "You and I haven't lost any love."

"I'm hired to gun your damn cows if you don't keep them on your own range, and to size up to any chesty ZP puncher, but I ain't hired to walk off and leave a man wollerin' in the dirt. You ain't hurt serious, but you need a place where you can hole up for a day or so. Don't be a fool."

A fool? That would be about it if he turned down Beck's offer. His horse had been run off, he had been left to stumble blindly to whatever shelter might offer, and now Ed Beck was holding out that shelter. The kid's swollen lips twisted at the thought of accepting a favor from the gunnie of Tom Grant. What would the old man and Ferd say when they heard? . . . That question decided him. To hell with them both!

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Hire for a Traitor

AT NOON the next day Ed Beck set food on the pine table in the cabin, and Clay Pike ate. His body was sore, and movement was painful. A dark red welt crossed his cheek, and when he caught Beck staring at the mark a fighting light whipped into his eyes. The terrible anger inside the kid made him want to strike at the whole world. Beck finished the meal, walked outside in the morning sun. Clay sat on his box, his face in his hands, his eyes boring into the dirt floor.

He roused when a horse galloped up to the cabin.

The voice of Tom Grant buzzed out at Ed Beck. "Old Zeb Pike has put his neck in a noose this time—he's killed Alex Lancing! Get your horse. We're goin' to Blue Bluffs. The sheriff got here from Prineville, and he's picked up some dope on Pike."

"He's got somethin' that links the old man with the killin'?"

"Sure, but I figured all the time Pike done it. There's nobody else for the job. Strap your guns on for quick action. The ZP is on the warpath."

Clay Pike walked to the doorway, and Tom Grant looked up at his step. He started as though he doubted his eyes, then he swung on Beck.

"What's a Pike doin' here? Hangin' out at your cabin, huh! Right at home! No wonder I been losin' cows in this section. Get off my ground, Beck, 'fore I kill you!"

Ed Beck made one effort to speak, but Grant's rage boiled higher. Clay stepped into the yard.

"Grant," he said, "Beck fetched me here from Horse Creek Crossing last night. I run into some trouble there. This is the first time we ever spoke a dozen words."

"Horse Crick Crossin'? I found your horse a mile from there, reins tied over the horn and bit outa his mouth."

His shrewd eyes took in the kid's condition, the red welt across his cheek, his gray color, the ice in his eyes. He seemed to realize an upheaval had taken place.

He flicked a quick glance to Ed Beck.

"I reckon I was a mite hasty just now, Ed. You've rode yourself ragged to keep down thievin' on this range. Seein' a Pike inside my house threw me loco fer a minute."

Beck nodded that the matter was settled. "Any more of our water been poisoned?" he asked.

Tom Grant jerked a glove from his hip pocket and threw it to the ground. It was a large size with a fringed gauntlet.

"Ten cows dead at Gopher Springs, and the gent that done the job left this glove. But you can bet your bottom dollar the ZP puncher that owns that glove ain't ever goin' to claim it." He kicked it aside as useless evidence.

Clay Pike knew the glove without the shadow of a doubt. He also knew the Half Triangle T had been crying that their water holes had been poisoned. He hadn't believed the poisoning charge, but as he stood in the hot sun, his body throbbing from a cowardly beating, he suddenly wondered. Men who would wield a blacksnake whip in the night would be capable of other underhanded deviltry. The glove Grant had kicked aside belonged to Ferd.

"Come on, let's get goin,'" Grant said to Beck.

They were riding to Blue Bluffs to hear what evidence the sheriff of Pineville had uncovered on the murder of Alex Lancing. Grant had said the ZP was on the warpath over the arrest of the old man. The kid's fingers strayed to his own guns. He had asked Beck to recover them for him the night before as they had prepared to leave Horse Creek. Beck had shown no uneasiness over having him armed. Clay took a step toward the men as they turned.

"I'm asking you for the loan of a horse to ride to Blue Bluffs," he said. "I'm remembering it's always a Grant's privilege to tell a Pike to go plumb to hell when he asks a favor."

Grant's brows drew together. "Loan you a horse and have you pull his lungs out gettin' in to help your old man."

The kid's glance was cold. "No, just loan me a horse. I'll see how things are in Blue Bluffs, then ride out to the Half Triangle T and get my sorrel. I may be cleaning out of the country for good."

Grant's eyes glowed. "Get him a horse, Beck."

CLAY PIKE felt the eyes of the barn man upon him as he rode up to the Blue Bluffs livery stable between Tom Grant and Ed Beck. Old Bill Sollesbury and Zeb Pike had cussed each other for twenty years, but now the barn man scowled as he saw a Pike riding with enemies of the ZP. He addressed Clay without a glance for Grant or Beck.

"Ferd's been burnin' up the earth a-lookin' for you." He stopped speaking and shifted his tobacco to the other cheek. "Goshamighty, kid, you look like you'd hitched up with a catymount."

"A pair of catamounts," Clay said, and left no room for further conversation.

"Here comes Ferd now," Sollesbury said tartly. "Reckon he saw you ride into town."

Grant was in the back of the stable looking at a horse he thought of buying. Ed Beck was leaning against the stall, waiting for Clay. His hands slid an inch nearer his guns as he saw Ferd Pike coming toward them in long strides. He and Clay were a few steps back from the door, out of Ferd's range of vision.

"Did that damn kid brother of mine ride in here?" the big fellow called to Sollesbury. "I heard he was in town."

"He just rode up with Tom Grant and Ed Beck," old Bill snapped, still smarting from the way the kid had cut him off about the welt.

"I guess you saw crooked, Bill. The kid

wasn't ridin' with Grant and Beck."

Clay Pike stepped from the shelter of the stall. Ferd swung about, and their eyes met. Before a word passed, Tom Grant came forward on his way toward the door. He spoke to Clay as he passed.

"I'll be goin' on up town, Pike. If you're ready to leave ahead of me, haze on out to the Half Triangle T and get your horse."

He walked on, leaving a yawning silence in his wake. His tones had been friendly, the same as though he had spoken to one of his own men.

Ferd Pike stood with his large hands at his side, a tenseness gripping his two-hundred pounds of muscular body.

"Did Grant say you was puttin' your horse up at the Half Triangle T?" he asked.

"You heard right," the kid answered. The red welt across his cheek flamed out from his gray skin.

Ferd gave like an oak that gets a weakening blow, then he was forward on his toes, his voice rumbling. "So you put up at Grant's last night! Wanted to be handy to your lady love! A woman has turned you against—"

"Don't lay none of this to Martha Runion," Clay cut in.

The silence throbbed. Ferd weighed his next words carefully

"The old man's in jail, charged with murder. Alex Lancing was killed and his body dragged through wire fences to a swamp. The sheriff has found old Zeb's boots, and they're wire scratched."

"How'd the sheriff come to find them boots?" the kid asked.

For that instant it seemed they might battle back to firmer footing. A flicker of feeling had squeezed through the coldness in Clay's eyes.

"Somebody tipped him off," Ferd answered, and his lids were sinking lower and lower over his burning eyes. "Only three of us knew, you and me and Emmet. Emmet was with pa all day and didn't see the sheriff."

Clay felt the world shut down to just the two of them. "And you didn't tell," he said.

"And I didn't tell."

Old Bill Sollesbury's whispers rattled in his throat. He cussed the pair of them for blind, blazin' fools. Ferd was advancing on the kid now, three slow steps.

"You'll never get those hands on me," Clay said. "Don't try."

Ferd understood, and stopped. The kid was swift as forked lightning with his guns. The shock of the kid's cold voice, ordering him to halt, shook him from his insane anger.

"I ain't afraid of you, Clay," he said. "But this is not the time or place for us to settle up." He looked at him for a terrible second before he swung away. "A traitor!" he breathed.

Clay watched him go, dimly aware that Ed Beck had come from his gun crouch and that old Bill was whispering again. Inch by inch, the kid felt the blood flowing back over his body. That last word Ferd had breathed was seared into his brain.

As he moved to leave, the barn man spoke to him. "Come back and get your nag when you're ready, Pike. But after today, you and Grant and Beck can stable your horses some'ers else. That goes fer the whole Half Triangle T."

ED BECK kept to Clay's side like a shadow as they made a brief survey of the town. The old-timers in Blue Bluffs were staunchly behind old Zeb, and the news that young Pike had gone over to Tom Grant spread like fire. Most of the grayheads said flatly it was a lie. Old Bill Sollesbury must have heard crooked. Not a soul in Blue Bluffs dared ask Ferd Pike for the straight of it.

The Elk's Horn was the saloon where the ZP always bought its whiskey, and

while there was no written law against a Grant drinking at its bar, there was strong feeling. Ed Beck knew he might be pushing trouble to follow Clay Pike into the Elk's Horn, but he wasn't letting the kid out of his sight.

The flare came when Beck snarled back at an old-timer who was lacing out Tom Grant. The fellow tramped across the room and planted himself before Beck.

"Pull in your neck when you're in this saloon, gunnie. Grant is pushin' this charge against old Zeb, and he knows dang well Zeb Pike never stole any money or hit a man in the back."

"Alex Lancing's bill sack with three-hundred was found in this hole where the boots was hid," Beck threw back. "How'd that money get in a trick closet in the ZP ranchhouse?"

They closed up on him like a wolf pack. They were open in saying that now was as good a time as any in ridding the town of a hired gunnie. There was no lightning arm among them, but there was courage and there were numbers. If Beck went for his weapon, it would spell death.

Clay Pike stood alone at the bar. His blood was lifeless in his veins. He watched the trap close about Ed Beck. They were set to get him, these supporters of old Zeb. Clay slowly straightened. Ed Beck had picked him up from the sand when he was crawling like a snake. He had taken him to his cabin and treated him white. He had openly hated a Pike, yet he had done that much.

"Stand back, you fellows!"

The words were not loud. Clay Pike had stepped to a vantage point, and his guns dominated the room. The interruption gave Ed Beck a chance to get his own guns out.

"Let's get out of here, Beck," Clay said.

The old-timers offered no resistance. This was a Pike saloon, and every man here had felt the evil hand of Tom Grant, but they let his gunnie walk unharmed for the door. They had never before seen this youngest of the Pikes in fighting form. They looked at him and recognized his power. He was fighting for Grant's gunnie. They stood with stiff lips as the pair backed out.

"Thanks, Pike," Ed Beck said to Clay Pike as they walked toward the stable. "You saved me for a good salavatin'."

"And you saved me from crawlin' a whole night on my belly. There's no love between us, Beck. I owed you that much."

They found Tom Grant had already left Blue Bluffs, but a swift ride brought them up with him. Beck fell in close to the owner of the Half Triangle T and began to talk. Clay pulled ahead, glad to ride with his thoughts.

There had been talk about the money found in the secret closet where old Zeb's boots had been. How had it got there? And who had told the sheriff? Clay's mind turned to Emmet Moyer. Ferd had said Emmet had been with Zeb all day, but Ferd could be mistaken. The kid's lips twisted at the thought. Ferd had called him a traitor. That had been a mistake. A beating might build up a terrible anger, even an anger that swelled to a killing point, but it couldn't turn him into a traitor. Ferd and the old man should have known that.

The distance to the Half Triangle T was well eaten up when Tom Grant made his offer.

"I'll pay you what you ask to ride for me," he said among other things. "I look for trouble; might even start it myself. I'm offerin' you this to see if you got the guts to find out for yourself who is poisonin' water holes, shootin' cows and bushwhackin' men."

They rode on in silence. He tried to think calmly of the offer, to look beneath the surface, but the scene in the livery stable in Blue Bluffs kept rising and

sweeping cool thought aside. A traitor was what Ferd had called him. He was trusting Emmet Moyer and casting out his own brother. Tom Grant was offering him work, but there was a shimmer in the rancher's eyes that warned the kid. Still if he refused to work for Grant he'd have to hunt new fields. Every cattleman in this section would soon learn of that name Ferd had called him.

He looked up to Tom Grant.

"I'll take the job," he said. "Never mind about the pay."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Debt to Pay

MARTHA RUNION was turning her horse loose as they rode up to the barn. She stood against the brown logs of the old building, her lips parted, her eyes round in surprise.

"Marthy," Grant called as he alighted, "get acquainted with my new man. Clay Pike is now workin' for the Half Triangle T."

She didn't smile or speak. Slowly the wonder left her eyes, and questions crept in. She was waiting for him when he came from unsaddling his horse.

"I don't believe it, Clay."

He nodded.

Her face went white. "Hired to that man! Joining the men who ride at night and whisper behind locked doors and plot evil!"

"Tom Grant isn't the only evil mind in the world." His tones were dry. It felt strange defending Tom Grant.

"I hate him!" the girl flared as they walked along the path. "You know I hate him for what he has done to Aunt Tildy, and yet you do this."

"He's too busy to say nice things to his wife, Martha. Remember there is a range war ready to break."

She thought the words over slowly, weighing them against the tight tones in which they had been uttered, against his set gray face. This wasn't the same man to whom she had talked at the old pine tree. This was a stranger who reminded her of the other strangers who rode swiftly to and from the Half Triangle T these days. She choked down her fear and made an effort to shake him to his senses, to bring back the real Clay Pike. She reached a hand toward the red welt across his cheek.

"You've been hurt. What is it?"

He started back from her fingers. "Don't ask me about that, Martha—now or ever!"

Her hand fell to her side. "Things are all wrong, Clay," she whispered. "We must meet this fresh trouble together. Tell me."

"It's nothing for a woman to hear."

"I've heard Tom Grant give the same answer to Aunt Tildy many times lately. Tonight you are strangely like him, like the others that ride into the yard, eyes gleaming for the gold he has promised them. I won't believe it's that with you, Clay. Tell me it isn't for gold!"

"I've finished with the old man and Ferd. That's enough to say."

She stepped close to him, although his eyes tried to hold her away. "It isn't enough! I love you and I have a right to know what has turned you against your own blood. There has to be some other way besides this!"

His lips pulled to a smile that drove the last sign of color from Martha Runion's face. "I was called a traitor today."

"A traitor! Who called you that?"

"Ferd."

"Ferd! Then he knows you have hired to Tom Grant!" She grabbed his shoulders with firm fingers. The slim young girl was fighting to break through his terrible calm. Nothing could live, not even love, when the eyes and heart were bound in ice.

"Clay," she begged, "no matter what

Ferd has said, you must not do this—you mustn't turn on your own blood!"

"Turn on my own blood," he repeated. "You too call me a traitor."

"Not a traitor, Clay. But you can't hire out to Tom Grant. Already it is destroying you. You must tell him now. Take your horse and ride away."

"No," he said quietly. "I have hired to Grant. I'm staying with the job."

She drew back. She searched his face, and into her eyes crept the deadliness of failure. "I hope your pay is very high, Clay," she whispered. "Otherwise you might wake up to find you have not charged enough for what you have thrown away. Love should sell very high."

"Martha—you mean—"

"Don't try to take my hand, Clay. I've watched Aunt Tildy suffer because of a man who placed love at the foot of the list. I—I thought you were different."

She slid past him and ran up the trail. Evening shadows were over the scene. It seemed to Clay, as he watched the stout old house receive the slight figure of Martha Runion, that the last thing in life had been shut away from him. For a second he thought of calling her back, of telling her all. Then the vision of what had happened at Horse Creek Crossing stilled the thought. His fingers crept to the welt on his cheek. He couldn't tell Martha of that. That lay between him and Ferd and old Zeb.

THE air in the small room was foul with the breath of a dozen men, yet no thought was given to lifting a window. The things they discussed were too secretive. There might be listening ears. And besides, the freshness of the night would not fit to their words.

Tom Grant said that on the morrow they would strike against the ZP. They'd throw the herds back from Three Mountains Creek and take the land ten miles deep. He was through with marking time. Zeb Pike had laid himself open for any type of warfare when he shot Alex Lancing in the back and dragged his body to a mud hole. Then there had been the poisoning of springs.

Grant weaved on spread feet. "I'm sick of havin' my men bushwhacked and my cows poisoned—and I'm sick of listenin' to this squawk about property rights. I'm standin' on my rights to free range. That stretch of choice land south of Three Mountains don't belong to Zeb Pike no more than it does to me. What if he has held it fer thirty years? Ain't that long enough fer one man to hog the range? Besides, he's lost all rights to everything by his skunk plays. Murderin' an old man like Alex Lancing!"

The words boomed into growls of satisfaction. Their echoes whispered away. Eleven pairs of eyes slid now and again to the face of Clay Pike. He was looking over their heads and straight through the wall. If his thoughts disturbed him, he gave no sign.

"Sets like a tombstone," one man whispered.

Tom Grant began giving out the positions for the next day's fight at Three Mountains Creek, for every man knew the old ZP would rear up and fight. Old Zeb was behind the bars of a jail, but Ferd would come roaring onto the scene. and the ZP punchers were known for their scrapping hearts.

The slender, silent youth looking into space had been considered the most dangerous gunman on the spread. A few sly looks passed from man to man as this thought flashed to active brains.

Grant was placing his men carefully along the creek, at spots where it would be easy to snipe any puncher who tried to hold the ground. He selected mostly rocky points where one high-powered rifle could sweep free and wide.

Last of all, he gave Clay Pike his po-

sition. It was the center crossing of Three Mountains, the key position. Ten chances to one, it would be his rifle that opened the fight. He would be the first to pick off a ZP cow and drive back a ZP puncher—if the puncher could be thrown back. Most of the ZP crew were hard livers who spent Pike money freely in times of peace and buckled on extra guns in times of war. They wouldn't be caught napping with this move. Old Zeb had been prophesying it so long their trigger fingers were itching.

Tom Grant's breath was cutting lightly across his dry lips as he laid out the kid's position. He talked as though it all was cut and dried. Grant's voice slowly seemed to draw the tension of the room to a single focus, and that focus was Clay Pike.

"Do you all understand?" Grant asked when the instructions were complete.

Young Pike rose from his chair. "I understand," he said. He walked from the room without another word.

CLAY PIKE found his way through the dark hall to the front porch. Tomorrow he would start paying back Ferd and the old man. They would know he was among that line of gunmen strung along Three Mountains. They'd be able to feel it, the same as he'd feel Ferd on the other side. He was glad Grant was striking immediately. It was better than waiting.

He stepped down from the small square of porch and walked blindly toward a low brush fringe following a stream. The air was good, and he needed to walk. He had known it would be this when he hired to Grant, and he had wanted it, but the emptiness inside him was like a cave.

From the willows about a small boxed spring, Martha Runion stepped into his path. She drew him back to the deep shadows. A tall gaunt woman rose up from a rock near the spring and tried to stem the girl's words.

"Marthy, you're played out. This ain't no time to talk."

"I brought Aunt Tildy down here so we could see who came to that secret meeting tonight," the girl burst out. "I wanted to know if you would be there, Clay Pike, whispering behind locked doors, plotting against your own father! I couldn't believe your words—I had to see with my own eyes. I'm glad you came by our hiding place. I'm glad to let you know what I think of you!"

Tildy Grant shook the girl. "Marthy, you don't understand the ways of men. They got to be secret. This is war."

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"Maybe I don't understand the ways of men, but I know the way a woman's heart can suffer. I've watched you grow thin and worn and old! You sit with clenched hands while he whispers and plots. That is never going to happen to me."

The woman groaned.

"Marthy, you love this boy. That's everything. It has to be." Her voice was fierce. "If it ain't enough, then you don't love him enough."

The girl stood mute under such terrible devotion.

The woman spoke to Clay Pike. "Don't stay on the Half Triangle T." Her fingers were like iron on his arm. "It ain't good for blood to turn against blood. Take Marthy and go away."

"I have a debt to pay," Clay answered her slowly. "I can't go away—yet."

Martha smothered her laugh, for life was breaking about the ranch house. Spurs were tinkling softly, men were walking swiftly to horses.

"You see, Aunt Tildy," she whispered, "he hasn't time for love—yet."

He offered no word as the two women hurried along the brush fringe to enter the house by the back way. Tildy feared Tom Grant too much to be found absent when he should hunt his bed. Most of the men from the meeting rode away. A few strode quietly to the bunkhouse. The scene was soon a peaceful wash of moonlight.

The terrible desolation that had been in the voice of Tildy Grant came back to smite Clay. It had taken a deep urge to bring the woman to ask him to leave the Half Triangle T when her man wanted him there. She loved the slim Martha, and craved something better than her own life for her.

Clay held no anger against Martha Runion. This new despair was just another score to settle with Ferd and the old man. They had done this to him. They had shamed him with a beating, branded him traitor, and robbed him of the woman he loved.

The fight tomorrow at Three Mountains would be the beginning of the settlement. With the first whiff of trouble, Ferd would come a-helling to the aid of his men. The old man would be charging against his iron bars like a mad bull. And Clay would be paying them off—with bullets.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Dying Don't Lie

"GRUB PILE!" The cook's cry lifted and the clangor of his iron triangle cut the crisp morning air.

The gray of dawn still lay on the range. Men slopped cold water on their faces from the tin wash dish and filed to their places at the long table. The two crews that were carrying on with the daily work ate their food with little conversation. They seemed to feel the tension gripping the Half Triangle T. Tom Grant moved restlessly about the horse corral and barns, uneasy to have these men off to their work.

They rode away at a gallop, the first flush of the morning in their faces. As they dropped behind a hill, mounted men appeared as though they had been hiding in the earth. They dropped reins at the barn and waited for their number to fill. Seven were soon there, and Clay Pike was among them. After a minute or two of restless pacing, Grant motioned Clay to his side. They walked away from the rest. The rancher spoke bluntly of the need for opening the battle with a crash. Let the ZP understand from the first that the Half Triangle T meant business.

They walked along the fringe of trees at the creek, neared the boxed-in spring. Tildy was there, drawing water hand over hand. Grant swung back toward the barn. Then he caught sight of a figure mounted on a big black horse. It was a woman,

her black hair and eyes a memory of the midnight. Her grace was striking as she drew nearer.

Grant's eyes lighted with that first sight of Ranny Beardsley's widow, then they shifted back to the gaunt woman drawing water at the spring. Clay also looked toward Tildy Grant as she pulled up the leaky bucket and poured its contents into a five-gallon can.

She lifted her head, saw the swaying figure on the black horse. She dropped her bucket again to the water and drew it up, but her eyes never left Sarah Beardsley. She let the bucket rest there, not thinking to empty it. Her spare body stiffened. Her eyes, under the old hat that had once been her husband's, reached out to every curve in the widow's body.

Grant met the dewy-eyed Sarah, and his hand was at her elbow as she lightly dismounted. There was no reason for his assistance, unless it was that he wanted to touch her. Clay noticed the look in his eyes, and concluded that was it.

Tildy still did not empty her bucket, although the water was leaking away in two lively sprays. It was wetting her big worn shoes.

"Good morning, everybody," Sarah Beardsley called, but it was false to include the others when her glance had been only for Tom Grant. "I'm worried, Tom," she said. "Three ZP punchers came to my door last night and ordered me to keep my cows farther back from Bull Creek. Tom, are you sure it's safe to use the range Zeb Pike has held so long?"

"Throw them cows on that stretch like I told you. The more there is of them ZP punchers at Bull Crick, the less we'll have at Three Mountains." He laughed. "I'm movin' across Three Mountains myself this mornin'."

Clay Pike silently admitted the shrewdness of Tom Grant. This flare at Bull Creek would split the ZP force; and the ZP wouldn't open fire on the widow's cattle or men until they awoke to the realization that Grant was behind the move.

As the Half Triangle T owner allayed the fears of the widow, he stood very close to her, and their eyes filled in the gap left by words. Tildy was still standing at the spring watching them, the bucket forgotten, her big hands clenched.

Martha Runion came swiftly down the trail to the spring, her chin high, her eyes dark with anger. The widow turned and called a gay greeting to her. The girl stepped to her aunt's side, making no answer to Sarah Beardsley.

Tom Grant strode toward her. "See here," he snapped. "Speak a civil greeting to a guest."

"She is your guest. You've spoken to her."

SARAH BEARDSLEY gasped a low, musical sound. "Martha, dear, I don't want you to feel this way to me. I've been so lonely this summer. I'd like knowing you."

Martha Runion faced her. "Has Tom Grant suggested you be friendly with me, Mrs. Beardsley? Is he afraid I might try to get an accounting of my father's money if I became too angry?"

The black eyes, which had sparkled at Tom Grant like beautiful jet, whipped fire at the girl. "You are a spoiled child. You should be taught to remember your manners—that is, if you have any."

Tildy Grant straightened under those last slow words. Her vacant eyes stirred with life. For a second it seemed she would speak, then she turned and walked up the trail to the house. She was leaving the girl who had come to her support.

Clay stood still. He couldn't go to her side, she would consider him another enemy. But Tildy Grant had not deserted her niece. She was now coming back down the trail, and one hand was held beneath her waist apron. As she walked

toward the tight group, Grant swung on her.

"Get back to the house and take this ill-mannered girl with you." He stepped close to her. "I said, 'Get into the house.'"

"It's best to settle this here and now," the woman said. "I've worked for you for years, Tom Grant. I've liked workin' for you—that's the fool in a woman. She slaves her fingers to the bone for a man, only askin' that he love her. I've always been satisfied, because never before have you took another woman."

She swung on Sarah Beardsley. "You're young. Your body is full of curves. You're beautiful. Before, only gold has taken my man from me, but now your body calls him. You're beautiful!"

Tom Grant reached out to crowd her back. But for the first time, she stood her ground.

"This woman is a snake!" she said in her low burning voice. "She is trying to take you away from me." Tildy shook off her husband's hand and turned back to the woman. "Sarah Beardsley, get off this ranch and never set your foot on it again. Haul your slinky body onto that horse and go!"

The black eyes of Sarah Beardsley showed no fear. Educated in a big city, she still roused to the fighting blood of early ancestors who had carved their way to success. She was scornful of the ungainly woman who had dared issue an order. She laughed in her face. Her eyes traveled over the flat-chested body, the big feet and long arms.

"You cry of years of work, of slavery. Do you think a man marries a slave? Does he want a woman who kills herself for him? No! He wants more than that. He wants beauty and love and—children!"

Tildy Grant's eyes were pits too black to register feeling. She laid her hand on her flat chest, aware of her useless years. Her right hand came out from the folds of the apron, and she pointed a gun at Sarah Beardsley.

"Go before I kill you!"

Tom Grant leaped at his wife, and the impact of his body swept her from balance. Her lips grimly locked, she clung to the gun. His strong fingers clamped down on her wrist. There came a smothered explosion. Tildy weaved back, a low cry breaking from her thin lips. Blood sprang from her side.

Clay caught her as she fell, the strong young arms of Martha aiding him. Sarah Beardsley swung to her saddle, and Tom Grant leaped to her stirrup for a few hasty words. He turned back to the two kneeling beside his wife as the woman galloped away.

THE men carried Tildy to the sitting room of the Half Triangle T ranchhouse and laid her down on the sofa. She opened her blazing eyes and drove Tom Grant back.

"A bullet for pay!" she whispered. "After eighteen years—a bullet for pay!"

Martha came with hot water and bandages, but the woman would not quiet until Tom Grant had gone from the room. He paced back and forth on the hard earth before the house. A few of the men straggled up from the barn for information of the shot.

"We'll get goin' before long," he told them. "There ain't nobody been hurt bad."

A half hour later a man came from town on a lathered horse.

The sheriff of Prineville had had word that was calling him away, so he was setting the trial of Zeb Pike for the afternoon. There was no law machinery in the little stage stop of Blue Bluffs, so things had to be wound up while Sheriff Brand was on the scene.

"It's a tight case against old Zeb," the messenger announced in tones loud

enough to carry to the room where Tildy Grant lay. She waved Clay and Martha back, so she might not miss a word. "You better get in town with your men so's the ZP punchers won't carry things," the fellow went on. "We ought to have a hangin' 'fore the sun sets."

Grant's short laugh answered him.

After a few low words, the two men went toward the barn to gather a following. Martha straightened and looked at Clay Pike.

"You better ride on to town with Tom Grant," she said. "You are his man now."

The words cut the color from the kid's face. Tildy's voice, that had been a groaning whisper came clearly with a burst of strength.

"Don't send young Pike away, Marthy. Come close to me—both of you."

Clay and Martha obeyed. There was something in the woman's tone that demanded it.

"So they are hanging Zeb Pike for the murder of Alex Lancing—because he was the only one to benefit by havin' Alex under the sod." It was strange to see her drab eyes shimmer. "If Tom got old Zeb hung by the neck it would mean a strong enemy put away, and that much better sailin' for him and Ranny Beardsley's widow. Tom and the widow won't have much trouble beatin' Marthy out of her money once I'm gone."

Martha's tight voice broke in. "You won't die, Aunt Tildy. You—"

The shimmer in the drab eyes stopped her. "I don't ask to live," the woman whispered. She was quiet a moment, then spoke to Clay Pike. "One thing the sheriff and nobody knows is that Alex Lancing drove out to the Half Triangle T the night he was killed. I never meant to listen, but I heard him chargin' Tom with stealin' whole herds, and he said Zeb Pike had opened his eyes to the skinnin' he was gettin'. He was through pourin' money into the Half Triangle T, and he wanted a quick settlement of two certain herds of cattle. He was killed on his way back to Blue Bluffs."

Her eyes didn't waver from the hard glance of Clay Pike. She lifted a weak finger and pointed to the welt across his cheek.

"The mark of a whip," she whispered. "Your pa and brother threatened you the beatin' if you come sparkin' Marthy."

Clay Pike drew away from the sofa. "There's things even a dying person can't say."

Martha Runion was looking at the red welt with a terrible birth of understanding. She took a quick step toward him.

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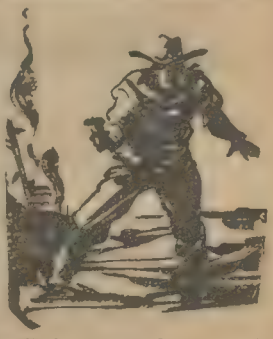

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His eyes stopped her.

"I told you never to speak of it, Martha —*never!*"

Tildy Grant watched them, and satisfaction crossed her eyes. She motioned the man to bend close.

"When Tom Grant gave another woman the love that belonged to me, I began watching him, listening at windows, sneaking to doors in my bare feet. I was listening for some word of this other woman. I didn't want to know, yet I had to!" Her whisper choked her, and she rested a moment. "I listened when a spy from the ZP talked to Tom and Ed Beck. He told them of the quarrel between you and the Old Man Pike—how he threatened to bullwhip you. They knew he wouldn't do it, so they planned for two men to wait for you at Horse Crick and give that beatin'."

Clay Pike leaned very close to her. "You hate Tom Grant now," he said. "A woman like you can hate worse than any. You're using this way to even the score, to—" The muscles in his throat tightened, it was a second before his voice returned. He laid a hand on her flat chest. "Don't lie to me!"

"I'm dyin'," the woman said calmly. "I see beautiful green fields around me, I feel the cool breeze of death on my face. Clay Pike, layin' at the door of death, I wouldn't lie to you."

He arose from her couch, and the light of restored life was in his eyes. The iron in his face stood out. Fresh power rippled through his veins. The tired woman smiled, and the approach of a great rest smoothed many of the lines from her face.

CHAPTER SIX

Reunion in Powdersmoke

CLAY and Martha drove the buckboard slowly toward Blue Bluffs, for in the back, wrapped in clean sheets and hand-pieced quilts, lay the body of Tildy Grant. Tom Grant had ridden ahead, and he did not know of his wife's death.

They drove up to the house of Jim Libby, the storekeeper, and Mrs. Libby asked them to place the body on her spare bed. When Martha said they must hurry on to the trial, the woman looked sharply at Clay Pike, then nodded.

As they neared the jail, where the trial was about to begin, the girl laid a hand on Clay's arm. "Say something—break that terrible calm. It would help to say even two words."

He turned, his eyes gray points of concentration. "I know who the ZP spy is. Emmet Moyer brought the news of the murder of Alex Lancing, and he insisted on old Zeb hiding those boots—boots that pa couldn't remember getting scratched. He listened outside the door when pa threatened to hide me!" He flashed her a thin smile; it was doing him good to talk. "He's threatened me with a hiding ever since I can recall, and he's never laid a hand on me."

The crowd about the jail was tense. Whispers flashed through it at the sight of the younger Pike. Guns bristled on every hip; eyes were grimly slanted. Clay felt the hostility as he walked among them.

At the door he spoke to Martha. "You must go back. This can't be settled peaceably." His mind lingered on that last. "And nobody wants it to be. Go back, Martha."

She crowded closer to him. "I must be with you to swear, too, that Alex Lancing visited the Half Triangle T the night he was murdered. Two witnesses are better than one, Clay."

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous, Martha."

"Your pa must be clear of this charge. You owe him that. And I owe a debt to Aunt Tildy that will be settled today." Her tone was final.

The room inside the jail was crowded,

but a path was made for Clay and Martha. Men drew back, eyes instantly questioning, most of them unfriendly. The sheriff pushed toward them.

"No women at this trial," he ordered. "Tain't goin' to be no place for them."

"I'm a witness, Sheriff," Martha said.

"I ain't heard of no woman bein' called."

"I have information. Isn't this the right place to give it?"

The lawman hesitated. "I reckon it is," he admitted. "I'm hopin' things will go off without any trouble here, but it looks doubtful. Tell what you got to say to Lawrence Roberts—he's been appointed judge—and get out."

They moved on toward the front of the room. The recently selected judge was shifting nervously behind the sturdy pine table, glancing speculatively from the ZP group, headed by Ferd Pike, to the Half Triangle T bunch, centered about Tom Grant. On the table rested a Bible, several bottles of whiskey and a pile of short guns. It seemed that a half-hearted effort had been made to disarm the gathering. Perhaps the uselessness of trying to dip the ocean dry had hit the sheriff. At any rate, the Pikes and the Grants were still armed to the teeth.

Six hand-picked men stood with Tom Grant, and scattered through the room and on the outside were more Half Triangle T gun-packers. Five men stood back of old Zeb Pike, and they too had been carefully selected. As Clay sized them up, his heart warmed at their support. They weren't ace men with the irons, like Grant's hired pack, but they were grim toughened fighters. All but one—that was Emmet Moyer. He stood close to Ferd and on the outside, nearest the Grant faction. His glance flashed warningly to Tom Grant when he saw Clay.

GRANT'S body rippled to tenseness. The still light in Clay Pike's eyes drained the color from his leathery cheeks. His hand swept to his holster, and he snapped his men to readiness for trouble. He moved a step into the path of Martha Runion.

"Get out of here, Marthy—and fast! I've had enough of women's talk for one day."

The girl's clear reply traveled over the stilled room. "You'll never have any more talk from your wife, Tom Grant. She's dead."

It swayed him back. He had expected the iron will and big body of Tildy Grant to go on forever.

"Dead!" he whispered.

The girl was past him before he realized. She was beside the pine table, speaking rapidly to the judge. Grant took long steps to her side.

"Order her out—get her away."

Clay Pike still stood a few paces down the narrow aisle. "Stand back, Grant," he ordered.

Tom Grant spun, hand to gun, but he was too late. Clay's weapon had leaped up to a level.

"I said get back, Grant!"

The judge banged on the table. "And I say for both of you to get back! This girl says she's got important information, and this court aims to hear it. Set down, Marthy," and he kicked her the box upon which he had been sitting. "Now let this murder trial of Zeb Pike's rear up on its haunches and commence. I ain't likin' the job of holdin' court against an old-timer like Zeb, but the sheriff appointed me. Sheriff, come forward and tell about findin' the boots scratched with wire and the money sack of Alex Lancing."

Ferd gave no sign he recognized his brother, standing a few feet from him. His face was molded to granite steadiness, and his big hands were close to his guns. Old Zeb had started when the thin voice of Clay Pike had ordered Grant back. He had spun, his eyes black with fury, but no words rolled forth. The thing old Zeb

had come to believe about his youngest son robbed him of his roar. He looked at the youth stonily.

As the gray-haired, hard-eyed lawman walked to the front, Clay moved a step toward the ZP crowd. Ferd turned slowly, faced him.

"Get over with Tom Grant," he ordered.

Clay made no answer. He was an inch behind Emmet Moyer now, and still in line with the Grant bunch. It was a good position, and Moyer seemed to realize its advantages. He spoke hurriedly to Ferd, urging him to move the kid away. But Ferd Pike was listening to the sheriff tell of finding the boots and the money.

"How'd you come to know about a secret closet in the ZP ranchhouse, Sheriff?" the judge asked.

"I had a note tippin' me off. It was supposed to been writ by somebody that saw them boots hid."

"I'd like to see that note, Sheriff." It was Clay Pike who made the request.

The crustly old lawman searched the speaker's face. "I didn't keep it, but are you meanin' to say I didn't get it?"

"No. I wanted my pa and brother to see the writing, and I wanted every other man in the country to see the writing and know that it wasn't mine. I know the man that wrote it—he's standing there with the ZP men right now! He's trying to get Ferd to cut down on me. He's so guilty his eyes are racing like a snake's tongue and he's green at the gills! Look at Emmet Moyer, Sheriff. . . . There's the man that wrote the note!"

"It's a lie!" Moyer threw into the hush that followed. "A lie to save himself! Everybody knows he wrote it!"

The sheriff had shifted a step to the side now, and a gun was in each hand. He threw all his power to holding the scene.

"Don't move, Pike," he said softly to Clay. "Stand hitched where you are, Moyer."

"Emmet Moyer is Grant's spy!" Clay announced in tones for the entire room. "He's been helping rob the ZP, and he'd been helping rob Alex Lancing. Lancing called them. . . . That's why they had to kill him!"

TOM GRANT was coming at Clay with hunched shoulders. Ed Beck was at his left, and another ace gunnie at his right. They were fanned out just enough to mow the kid down from three angles.

"Get back!"

The sheriff slammed out the command, but he was shifting to balance as the words died. He realized the Half Triangle T outfit was set for gunfire. They were going to burn the slender kid down before his tongue poured forth any more poison.

"It's a play to wipe out the ZP!" Emmet Moyer whispered in the ear of Ferd Pike. "He's chargin' me with bein' a spy so's he can come for us a-smokin'!"

Ferd saw the deadly advance of Grant and his two men, and thought they were centered on the ZP group. It looked like a 'play.' Hadn't the kid come to town with Beck and Grant? Hadn't he cut down on a room of men that were fighting for old Zeb?

"Stand away!" he ordered as the kid backed a step closer.

Zeb Pike squared his great shoulders and waited for the storm to break. Martha Runion slid from the protection of the table and fastened her fingers on the old rancher's arm. She thrust her face up to his, making him hear her.

"Clay isn't a traitor!" she hurled at him. "He's fighting for you! He's fighting for Ferd—for the ZP! Get behind him or Grant will wipe you all out!"

Zeb Pike looked down into the girl's eyes. They were black wells of determination.

"You've got to believe!" she sobbed. "You've got to!"

He grabbed her with one powerful hand and thrust her to partial safety. He planted

his body before her as he loosened his battle roar.

"Back Clay up, Ferd! Rally 'round him, boys! Fight with Clay!"

With the familar roar of old Zeb, the ZP men surged to the support of the kid. Ferd's breath burst in a terrific gasp. He spun to jam his gun into Emmet Moyer. But Moyer was shooting from the hip, his lips peeled back, his eyes glassy.

Grant and his men opened up. The Half Triangle T boss' first bullet was meant for Clay, but he reckoned wrong. Too swift for the eye was the move of the slim kid, who now carried the war for the ZP. Tom Grant stumbled, his gun clattering.

The battle was swift and terrible. Guns were palmed and spitting one second, the next they were shuttling from relaxed fingers. Men spun and toppled, and there was hardly room for them to fall. Clay Pike sank to the floor, but his deadly gun continued to speak.

The sheriff at last came to dominate the scene. Slow dying echoes mingled with his commands.

"Carry out the dead, somebody! Get some water for dressin' wounds!"

Ferd and Zeb Pike did not hear. They were lifting the body of Clay from the floor and stretching him upon some boxes hastily slid together by other ZP men. Martha Runion was with them, her eyes on the still white face. Ferd was bleeding from two wounds, yet his big hands ripped back the kid's shirt.

He looked up to his father with relief breaking across his set face.

"He ain't dead!"

Water and bandages arrived, and Ferd set to work. Blue Bluffs didn't have a doctor, so families and friends tended their own wounded. The swift fingers of Martha Runion worked beside the strong sure ones of Ferd Pike.

When Clay opened his eyes, the memory of the fight still lingered in their depths. Then they cleared. He smiled at Martha, then looked to Ferd and the old man.

"I guess we about settled things," he said.

"Everything is done settled," old Zeb rumbled. "Tom Grant and Emmet Moyer has cooked up their last batch of deviltry." He reached over and patted Martha Runion on the shoulder. "Young lady, when you get this boy for a husband, you're gettin' the whole Pike family rolled into one."

Ferd looked at her and nodded. "Us Pikes, we're like that, Marthy."

THE END

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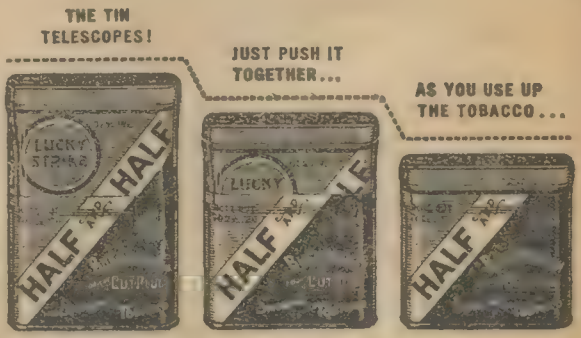

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By RALPH CONDON

"Why, you damned skunk! I'll—" His right hand jerked downward toward his gun.

DEATH BLOCKS THE TEXAS TRAIL

Chet Flagg, Texas trail driver, gave the Wolf Crossing coyotes his whole bag of fighting tricks in two quick lessons. . . . On the gun-flaming night when he needed them most, he had none left—unless a girl, bound hand and foot, could side him into battle!

CHET FLAGG raced out of Indian Gap with fifteen hundred thirst-crazed longhorns thundering at his heels. When he hit the open ground, he swung his horse clear of the trail and hauled up to watch as the bellowing tide of beef spilled from the pass and roared to the bank of the Republican River.

"Roll, you devils, roll!" he bellowed and grinned with deep satisfaction, for the worst was over. It looked like this herd of his was going to get through to market.

After five hundred miles of heat and desert, the steers were gaunt and thin. But in the wild broken country beyond

the river there was feed and water aplenty. Slow driving, with time for grazing, would bring the whole bunch, fat, sleek and top-priced, to the railhead. Chet was considering the upturn in his fortunes—when some warning sense pulled his eyes around.

In a cottonwood clump fifty yards away, he saw three men. Something about the manner in which they sat their horses caused Flagg to stiffen in his saddle. When the three saw him turn they started toward him, and the drover took quick stock of the situation.

All the way up the trail there had been ugly rumors of this Republican crossing. His own crew of four was far back, working the slow stuff through the gap. At best, they were a quarter of a mile away.

With no show of haste, Flagg swung to the ground as though to tighten his cinch. The move put his horse as a shield against the approaching men.

As they drew close and started to fan out he said," Howdy, strangers." He put enough emphasis on the last word to make his meaning clear.

IT BROUGHT them up short. The big man who rode in the middle and a little ahead of the others lifted a hand and his straight mouth pulled into a grin.

"Keep your shirt on, kid. We ain't going to throw you in the river. We're just looking for the ramrod of this outfit."

Chet didn't like the grin and he didn't like the voice. He had come up against a lot of hard men in the seamy twenty-four years of his life, and he'd learned to read them fast.

"No," he said. "You ain't going to throw me in the river. What's your business?"

"I'll talk to the boss," the big man said shortly. The smile was gone from his face.

"That's just what you're doin'," said Chet Flagg.

The bleakness of his tone shoved blood up into the big man's neck, but he covered with a laugh.

"The hell I am! Well, no offense, mister. You looked pretty young to be running such a big outfit." He laughed again. "I guess I made sort of a poor start to sell a business deal."

The three riders began to move forward then, but Flagg stopped them again.

"I reckon one start's about as good as another," he said flatly across the seat of his saddle. "You're about close enough for strangers that ain't declared themselves."

The big man shrugged. "You sure spook easy, mister, but I don't know as I blame you considering what's beyond the river. That country's enough to give anybody the jumps."

From the tail of his eye, Chet saw that his herd was mostly through the gap. He knew that his boys would be coming up in a little. The big man knew it too and was quick to go on.

"My name's Ross, and it's about that country beyond river that I hunted you out. Those brakes are lousy with raider outfits, and no regular trail crew has a chance against 'em. My business is cattle insurance. For a dollar a head, I supply a big convoy and guarantee you through."

Chet Flagg surveyed the man a moment with eyes that had gone cold with contempt.

"I've heard of you, Ross. Both your name and your racket stink all the way down the trail. You're the hairpin that plays both ends against the middle and either sweats out a fake guard fee or uses the same outfit for raiding. I don't have to tell you my answer to a squeeze like like that. Now take your weasel-faced pair of baby-scarers with you and ride out of here while I'm of a mind to allow it!"

For an instant things hung on the ragged edge. Ross' face was black with fury and his two flanking men held themselves stiff and ready. But a man on the ground has a long advantage in accurate shooting, and they weren't taking any chances. Chet Flagg had judged the temper of his men well.

"You've made a damn bad choice!" Ross called back as he flung his horse around. "Your beef is still a hell of a way from market!"

Chet stood watching the three run their horses off up the river. Before they were out of pistol range he yanked his rifle from its boot, half hoping the men would turn and give him an excuse to use it.

"Killing would improve that hombre," the young drover said aloud as they drew out of range. "And I've got a hunch I'll have to do it before he's a whole lot older."

FROM behind him he heard a wild, exultant yell as his drag crew sighted the river, and a moment later the four of them pounded up.

They were a tough and knobby bunch, those four. Montana White was lank and gnarled, but his grizzled head held the craft of fifty dangerous years. The lazy droop to Joe Williams' frame had caused more than one man to misjudge his lightning speed with a gun. And it had never been settled whether Limpy Gannon or Tom Call was the best hand with a rifle. Any one of those four would do to ride the river with, and Chet Flagg grinned at the sweat-streaked, dusty sight they made.

All four had taken in the situation at a glance.

Montana was first to speak. He jerked a gnarled thumb at the three retreating riders and said drily, "It sort of looks as how you'd been figuring on a piece of camp meat and then changed your mind."

"Ross," Chet grunted. "Insurance."

Joe Williams lifted a brow. "Buy much, Chet?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Flagg grinned and swung into his saddle.

For a moment the whole crew was still, watching the big herd down by the river.

Then Limpy inquired, "What you figuring to do about him, Chet?"

"Nothing right now," the drover decided. "He'll likely lie low for a time. And there's a guy over in that little town yonder that I want to see. You boys throw together a camp here in the cottonwoods and then ride on up for a drink. The beef'll hold at the water for a couple of hours."

"Maybe I'd best dangle along with you," Joe Williams suggested, but Flagg shook his head.

"I reckon not, Joe. If I go in sided, somebody might get the idea he'd made some progress at scarin' me. A man by the name of Ketterman runs the store, and you'll find me there." He put his horse to a lope and headed up the river.

THE half dozen buildings that made up the Wolf Crossing trade post had been placed with an eye to Indian raids. They were set in a circle on a little lift of ground close to the Republican. All the outer walls were of heavy logs with narrow loophole windows.

Chet Flagg rode through into the enclosure and swung down in front of the slab-roofed general store. Two men were sprawled on the porch. They were not the ones who had been with Ross but one glance was enough to tell they were part of that same crew which had given Wolf Crossing its evil name. The drover gave them a brief unanswered nod as he went by them through the open door.

One long counter ran across the back end of the place. The right half of that counter served as a bar, and the left was backed with shelves which held a thin

stock of merchandise. An old man, busy with the goods there, swung around at the sound of Chet's boots.

"Howdy," Flagg said.

The old man ran a shrewd appraising eye over the young drover. "Howdy. That your beef I heard bawling down to water?"

"That's right," Chet said. "My name is Flagg."

Behind him, he heard the two men coming in from the porch. At the same instant he caught a flicker of warning in Old Man Ketterman's eye.

"Glad to know you, Flagg. I reckon you'll be wanting to make up a list for the grub sacks."

"There'll be a few things," Chet admitted. "You go wait on those other gents while I figure it out."

Ketterman gave him a pencil and piece of paper before he went down the bar to set out whiskey for those two men.

Chet bent to his writing. He had it finished by the time the old man returned.

"I think this'll be about the sum of it for now."

Ketterman took the paper and read it carefully while he scratched the tip of his nose with the pencil.

"I've got everything but the dried peaches," he said. "Mildew got into my last sack and I had to heave 'em out. It's the damnedest thing the way them things will mildew on you." He worked briefly over the paper again and shoved it back, saying, "That'll come to seventeen dollars, Mister Flagg."

Chet picked up the slip and read what the old man had written. It said: "I knew Powder River Flagg's boy before you spoke. Glad to see you, but be careful. Sleep with one eye open and keep your herd small tonight."

As Chet Flagg finished reading that note, he heard some horses come up to the store. He couldn't tell for sure whether there were two or three of them, but he noticed the interested way the whiskey drinkers turned around to face the door.

"If you've got no peaches, I'll take some canned plums for the boys." He scrawled, "Thanks," on the note and handed it back.

"I'll get the stuff together right away," said Ketterman.

Chet shook his head. "No hurry. We'll be resting the stock a couple of days before we shove across the river." Watching the two gunmen from the corner of his eyes, he crossed the room to the door.

A quick look outside gave him a start. A wagon had pulled up, and a small gray-bearded man had just swung down to the ground. Still on the wagon seat was a girl. It took no second glance to see that she was extremely pretty.

At first sight of them, it occurred to Chet Flagg that some trouble pressed hard upon the old man and the girl. Then his attention was pulled swiftly away. Ross and his two bodyguards had come out of the building next door and swung toward Ketterman's porch.

With the old storekeeper's warning fresh in his mind, the situation set Chet's nerves sharply on edge. He knew he'd best be gone from there, but something in the faces of the old man and girl held him. He shifted along the wall to his right so that the open door was no longer at his back. Then he casually got out his tobacco to build a smoke while he waited.

ROSS didn't even glance at the young drover. He went straight to the old man, and on his face was the same smile he'd been wearing when Chet had first seen him.

"Howdy, Winters. I was hoping you'd ride in."

The old man jerked his head up, and anger swept the strain from his face.

"Don't you howdy me!" he said grimly.

"I've already given you the answer to your swindling deal. I've nothing more to say! I'll move my stock when and how I choose!"

The flat smile went from Ross' mouth, and his eyes were ugly. "I don't give a damn if you want to lose your lousy little handful of cows beyond the river," he said harshly. "But moving out is a different thing. You've grazed them on my land for two weeks, and you'll pay me for that before you ever cross the river!"

Desperate fury flashed in the old man's eyes. "Why, you damned skunk! I'll—" His right hand jerked downward toward his gun, but before he could bring it up Ross was upon him.

The weapon went spinning off the porch into the dirt. The big man's fist landed across Winters' neck in a murderous blow that sprawled him down on his side.

With the action, the girl in the wagon gave a cry of protest and sprang down. She thrust herself between Ross and the old man, who was rising dully to his feet. For an instant she tried to speak, but anger choked her. Abruptly she slapped the big man hard across the face.

The two men from the store had come out in time to see it. Their eyes shifted from that scene to touch coldly on Chet.

Ross stood for an instant after the girl's blow, then his hands shot out to seize her wrists.

"Why, you damned little spit-cat! You need some teaching. I'll—"

Chet Flagg moved swiftly on the balls of his feet.

"Ma'am," he said, "you've got the right idea, but you don't do it just right. Let me show you!"

His left hand caught Ross' shoulder, yanking him around, and his open right cut around in a blow that nearly tore the man's head from his neck.

The impact staggered Ross backward off the porch and into the dust. He gave a hoarse bellow as he went for his gun. Flagg was upon him then, before Ross could get his bearings, and jerked the pistol from his hand. Chet struck him once more, this time a wicked chopping blow with his fist. It spun the fellow over onto his back, the blood running free from his mouth.

Flagg let the rush of his attack carry him on beyond the man, where he flung about and set the captured weapon against Ross' men.

The speed of the thing had shocked them into an instant's delay, and now their hands pulled away from their undrawn guns.

"Get up!" Chet ordered Ross, and when the man obeyed, he thrust him around to serve as a shield. "Now, ma'am, if you and your dad will slide out of there to the left and get to your wagon, we'll bring this meeting to a close."

THE girl stood by the old man for a moment, her eyes wide with surprise. A little grin touched Chet Flagg's lips. Trail-dirty and unshaven as he was, he knew that he looked fully as tough as the others and that she had expected no help from him.

"Get moving," he urged. "I'd like to talk to you folks later. Maybe you'll want to throw in with my outfit through the brakes."

The old man stopped to gather up his gun. At that same moment, Chet heard more horses coming up behind him. "Go on!" he snapped. "Mount up and ride!"

"Get to camp, June," Winters ordered the girl grimly. "I'll be sticking with this lad until he's clear."

Flagg was shaking his head against that when the dry voice of Montana White cut in: "You just relax, Chet. Everybody's going to behave."

Chet Flagg's tense breath ran out of

him in a long sigh, and he turned to grin at his hard-bitten trail crew.

They sat their saddles with a watchful ease. The rifles across their laps had the hammers thumbed back.

"Welcome to the quilting bee," Chet said.

"Still looking for a piece of camp meat, son?" Montana suggested owlishly.

With the pressure relieved, the girl moved over close to Chet and held out a small brown hand.

"We can't thank you enough. I'm June Winters. Father and I have a little herd of stock bunched up the river about a mile, and this man has been trying to threaten us into paying him a grazing fee. He's run off our Indian riders and—"

"I know. I know," Chet said, impatient because the situation was still too dangerous for a girl. "You head for camp, and I'll see you later. We'll fix things so you won't be bothered any more."

She caught the urgency of his tone, and the two of them drove away.

Fury drove Ross to a rashness as he turned his head to fix Flagg with a murderous eye. "I'll get you for this! Don't believe I won't!"

One of the gunmen by the door started to edge around a little, and Limpy Gannon said, "How about the one on the right, Chet? If you want me to shoot him, I can get him right through the ears and never hurt the hide a bit."

The man by the door stopped dead, his face running clean of color. Chet calmly turned and mounted his horse. He eyed Ross coldly.

"I don't have to tell you to keep clear of my outfit," he said. "And if I hear you've even looked at that old man or his girl, I'll knock your ears back again."

Limpy and Tom Call swung to the ground and gave their horses over to be led away while they covered the retreat, backing along with their Winchesters ready until they could duck between the buildings. After that, they ran to mount up with their waiting comrades and the five of them rode back to the camp in the cottonwoods.

BECAUSE they'd missed their drinks, Chet Flagg got a bottle from his pack sack and passed it around while he told them of Old Man Ketterman's warning note.

Montana swore sourly.

"Keep the herd small, huh? Damn it, he means the oldest trick along the trail. I've seen that one before—tonight, those skunks will figure to jump the old man and his girl and shove their stock down toward ours. In the morning they'll come busting in on us and gun us down, and then if there's anything said they can claim they were just wiping out a set of cattle thieves."

Tom Call held up the bottle and sighted its level. "And here's to the reception we give 'em! Oh boy, oh boy! Wait until they start shoving that beef down tonight!"

But Chet Flagg shook his head. "No, Tom, there's other angles. There's Old Winters and his girl to think about. Aside from them, it ain't a bad idea to let 'em bunch the two herds for us. Saves work. Come dark, I'll just dangle up to Winters' camp, get 'em clear and let the program run. They'll just figure those two have pulled off to hide and plan to settle 'em later. Come daylight, we'll be on the bluffs yonder watching the smoke of our own breakfast fire and wait their coming!"

Montana slapped his leg in glee at the shrewdness of his young boss. The bottle went around again before they set to making their supper.

The trail-weary herd started to bed before night had set in; it would need little watching until daylight. The drovers

pulled back from the fire after their meal was done and lay talking as the time ran on.

When the last of the twilight was gone, Chet tightened his saddle cinch, grunted a last order to his men and rode away up the valley. He swung back from the river, giving Wolf Crossing a wide berth, and held to a walk so that the sound of his horse's hoofs would not carry far.

It was half an hour before he came into a growth of trees where a gulch opened out, and caught the sound of stirring cattle. He moved with much care from there on, smelling woodsmoke before he saw the red eye of a campfire deep in the cottonwoods.

Chet sat listening for a time, but he heard no sound of voices. At length he whistled softly, thinking that the old man might be on guard. A moment went by with no answer, and a deep uneasiness began to take hold of Flagg. He stepped down from his horse without whistling again. He dropped the reins over the saddle horn and went softly forward on foot, his gun drawn.

The fire had burned down to a mound of coals that gave but little light. Chet moved toward it, his sense of warning built high. When he was about twenty feet away, a little flame twisted up to throw an instant's flare, and he knew things were wrong. A coffee pot lay on its side in the edge of the ashes and a frying pan was dumped close by.

Chet Flagg took a slow, careful step back. A rasping voice stopped him dead.

"All right! There's two guns on you! Drop yours and move in!"

The drover let his breath run out in a long, disgusted sigh. He knew that his chances were no good at all.

"The boss wants you, wise guy," another voice said, and he gave it up then.

He dropped his gun as he went toward the fire. He was about halfway when a step sounded behind him, and in the same second a murderous crashing blow caught him across the side of the head. As he went down he heard the same voice say again as though from far off, "Wise guy!"

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly to Chet Flagg. The torment in his right temple sickened him and blocked his mind from any straight run of thoughts. Little disjointed ideas hammered in his brain. He passed out once or twice again before he came out of it to stay, and then the first faint light of day was beginning to show through a narrow window over his head.

He lay facing the wall of a low-roofed room, with his arms bound numbingly tight behind him. The size of the window where the daylight showed told him that he was in one of the loopholed buildings at Wolf Crossing. At first he thought he was alone in the place, but when he twisted over the dim light showed him two figures sitting propped in a corner.

"I wish I could help you," June Winters said, her voice grave but steady. "They—"

"Quiet," Chet warned. "Maybe if I have a little time—"

But it was already too late. Bars rattled and the door slammed open. Ross' bulk was framed there for an instant, then he saw that Flagg had moved and gave a savage grunt as he came on in.

He carried a half-filled whiskey bottle, and his teeth showed in a long wicked grin. For an instant Chet thought that he was drunk, but when the man spoke that thin prospect died and all other hope went with it.

"Well, my Texas bucko, you came out of it just in time! I was just figuring to rump some whiskey down you and get you in shape to stand at the window

where you can watch the showdown in your camp. It'll be short—but it'll be good."

He stood looking down while he gave his vicious meaning time to sink in.

Chet Flagg thought of his trail crew, and knew a moment of cold despair. Tough as they were, they would have no chance at all if they were waiting for him in the cottonwoods. Surrounding guns could block escape while men on the bluffs picked them off.

The young drover saw only one thin possibility. He acted fast. He jerked both knees up against his belly and drove a kick with every ounce of his strength! His boot heels smashed against Ross's right leg just under the knee.

The big man gave a bellow of pain as he staggered back. The instant that he caught his balance, he hurled the whiskey bottle at Chet Flagg's head. It caught him a sickening blow across the temple and glanced on to crash against the wall.

"Damn you!" Ross roared. "If I didn't have a show for you to see, I'd kill you now! Get up!" He rushed in, driving his feet murderously to the drover's ribs.

Whiskey fumes burned Flagg's eyes and the flailing boot toes knocked the air from his lungs, but he took it with no sound or move. After a moment Ross drew back, his blind anger spent.

He stood panting, glaring down. "Out again! Well, by God, I'll bring you to if I have to drown you! You ain't going to miss seeing this thing!" He spun on his heel and rushed from the room.

The second the door slammed after Ross, Chet Flagg started to move. He wrenched over into his side, to have a look at the shattered bottle. The top of the neck was still intact, running out into a jagged blade where the flare began. Twisting around, Flagg kicked that piece out into the middle of the room.

"Quick!" he snapped. "Whichever of you has the loosest hand, roll out and get hold of that!"

The old man started to move, but the girl was faster. She came out, rolling over and over to save the time of struggling to her feet. When she reached the bottle fragment she sat up and backed against it. Her arms were tightly bound, but her wrists had enough play so that she could pick the thing up.

Flagg lay watching her. When she had it held just to suit him he spun over and backed against her, twisting the bony sides of his wrists around so that he would not slash the big veins against the glass.

It was a desperate job, working blind. Time and again the razor-sharp edge slipped from the rawhide into flesh, and Chet could feel the sticky blood going down over his hands.

Outside, Ross' bellowing voice rose, demanding water, and there was the sound of running feet.

The girl never said a word. She just held the glass with all her might as the precious seconds ran by.

Sweat ran down Chet Flagg's face in a steady stream. He let caution go, flinging a dangerous weight back against the glass. . . Then Ross was shoving through the door again—just as the thongs gave way!

THE drover rolled to his feet as he tore his arms free. The darkness of the room hid his rush until he was full under way.

Ross hurled his water bucket before him with a startled yell as he clawed for his gun. But Chet Flagg came through the wash of it and smashed against him, driving his knee up into the pit of the man's stomach and bearing him back and off balance.

The two men carried through the door, crashing down in the yard with Ross' drawn gun locked between their bodies.

Somewhere beyond, Flagg heard men yelling and there was the crash of guns. But his immediate concern was with Ross, and his greatest safety rested in his closeness to the other man, where bullets would be hard to find him.

His left hand held Ross' wrist and he forced his right in between their locked chests in order to thrust the weapon's barrel down.

When the shot went off its blast threw them apart. Flagg's grip suddenly shifted, to close on the hot barrel, and he yanked on it with his whole weight. It came from the killer's limp hand with an ease that cost Chet his balance, but he rolled clear over inside the door and came to his knees facing out, in position ready to shoot.

It was then that the last of his breath went out in a shrill wheeze, and the whole world seemed dancing crazily before him.

Five men were pitched down in the dirt before the building. Two more were screaming as they ran across the circle, but a raking blast of guns from Ketterman's store cut them down before they could gain shelter.

There was a second of utter stillness after that last crash of shots, and then Montana's exultant yell set the echoes up again as Chet's trail crew came storming from the store, with Old Man Ketterman grinning at their heels.

Chet was on his feet by the time they reached him.

He led the way in to set the Winters girl and her father free.

"You hombres," he said ruefully, "were in about the right place to make up for my carelessness."

Montana nodded. "All right, but that was a smart trick of leaving your reins up so your horse could come back to camp. When we seen him, we knew they'd got you and figured it'd be a good idea to plant ourselves where they'd least expect us.

"We sneaked into Ketterman's about midnight and have been waiting there ever since, with the idea of locating you as soon as the main bunch went down to shoot up our camp."

"If you'll postpone telling how smart you are," Limpy Gannon grunted, "I'll take Chet over to the store and see If I can patch up some of the nicks he's collected."

Montana White looked at June Winters for a moment, then turned to Gannon with heavy contempt. "As usual, you speak out of turn," he said. "If you had the brains of a sheepherder you'd be able to see who's going to patch Chet up from now on."

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A thrilling human novelette of epic Western courage

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Calmly he emptied the dead man's gun at them.

CHAPTER ONE

Death at the Spring

THERE was really no good reason for his staying on this sun-bitten range any longer. Certainly no sane man could find a reason for clinging to such a stove-up spread. No one but a fool would continue to dream of what might have been, and try to laugh off a two-year drought that held on, unabated. . . .

Slow Bob Cryder ran a sleeve across his sweat-streaked forehead and tried to shut his ears to the plaintive bawling of his score or more of white-faced cattle ranged about the wire at the spring. Pitiful creatures, their bones showed starkly through the hide. They were mere caricatures of beef.

Slow Bob lifted his eyes to the sky, as he had done a thousand times before. It was brassy, unmarred by clouds. The sun beat down like hammer stroke, drenching

Gunsmoke Outcast

"Slow Bob Cryder," they called the hard-working patient cowman of Sulphur Creek who held out for two years against the hell of endless drought. . . . Yet it was speed, not patience, that won him the right to live, when the corpses of five top-hand gunmen pointed his swift new trail—to hopeless tragic flight from all he held most dear!

the earth with fire, shriveling even the cactus, to which the cattle had been reduced for food.

He closed his eyes against the glare, and wondered if it would ever rain again. He wondered, too, why resentment didn't boil up in him, why he didn't cry out to God, shake his fists at those brazen heavens and rant and rail and curse the drought, as most of the settlers on Sulphur Creek range had done before they gave up the unequal fight. He wondered why he hadn't lost his faith and driven his small herd out to higher pastures while there was yet time.

Without regret, he told himself it was because of some quality of his character that left him calm in times of stress when other men were beside themselves. Something in his blood left him immune to the

virus of stampede. He had never given up his faith that it would rain . . . tomorrow.

Slow Bob had felt sorry for those others when they rounded up their herds and started out for distant places, mayhap as dry and unfriendly as this. Well, he had gambled on his faith—and his string was about played out. His spring was still flowing, though meagerly. But feed . . . there was the rub. His cattle were starving.

It was ten long miles to browse, but he had been hauling feed in. The best he could get was leafy stuff without much strength in it, calculated only to keep the cattle alive . . . . until tomorrow, when it would rain. It was time now to go after another load.

Slow Bob drew his great height up from the stoop, clapped his sweat-stained hat upon his tawny thatch, stretched his lithe muscles leisurely and moved without haste toward the barn to harness his work team. It was then that he saw the dust cloud to the East.

He paused to regard it with studied interest. He saw horses spew from out that pall and come racing toward him. There were scores of them—big horses, little horses, red horses and black, pintos and duns and grays, fuzzy range ponies that showed the wear and tear of their long fight with the drought.

And now he could see the four riders hazing them onward. And so intent was he upon their coming, so puzzled as to the meaning of this drive across the burning plain, he missed the approach of the rider quartering out of the dust—until hoof-beats were in his ears.

HE KNEW that rider at once as Romaine Borger, boss of the R Slash B, the powerful outfit at the forks of Sulphur Creek. Of all the settlers in the basin, Borger had been the only one prepared to meet this drought and successfully fight his way through it. His windmills were scattered up and down the water-bearing bottoms of the creek. At the coming of this long dry spell, dozens of his haystacks had dotted the low-lying meadows. He even had hay yet.

The misfortunes of others had been Borger's gain. With a cattle scarcity and prices high, he had grown rich in time of trouble. Slow Bob found himself wondering about the visit of this man who had never shown anything but scorn for his neighbors. He was not left long in doubt.

Borger roared into the dooryard, curbed cruelly and lit down. He was a big, unfriendly man with close-set eyes, high cheekbones and down-curving lips. He radiated power and arbitrary authority. He bent a hard glance upon Slow Bob.

"Cryder," he said, with no hint of courtesy, "I'm driving a hundred head of broncs onto higher ranges. It's a long dry trip to next water, so we'll water them here."

Slow Bob showed no resentment. He stood eye to eye with the big rancher, smiling that slow, pleasant smile of his. His voice was low, controlled.

"I'd be most mortal glad to accommodate you, Mister Borger," he drawled. "But I reckon I ain't got as much water as maybe you thought. Spring's gettin' pretty low. It'll take you as much as four or five hours to water that stock, in bunches of ten."

Borger looked pityingly at him, then laughed as if at some obscene joke. "What are you talking about, Cryder? Four hours? We'll be watered and gone in thirty minutes. But I'll have to cut the wire around your spring to do it."

"That's just what I meant," said Slow Bob without rancor. "I put that wire up to keep stock from crowdin' in and riling the spring. I guess if you want your horses watered, Borger, you'll run 'em into the seep in small bunches—and be thankful for the favor."

"Thankful?" Borger laughed again. "Scared for your little mud hole, eh? Afraid we'll cut your wire. Well . . . look!"

He pointed, and as Slow Bob turned to follow the man's leveled index finger, he heard the hollering of the riders, the shrill whinnying of thirsty horses and the musical twang of snapped wire.

Folks had called Bob Cryder "Slow." But there was nothing slow with his perception now. He saw that two of Borger's riders were off their horses, with wire cutters in their hands. He saw the ponies pressing through the breach, burying their muzzles in the sweet water flow, breaking down the earthy banks, churning the seep into a quagmire, ruining his spring. But if he saw these things that meant so much to him, he also saw something less obvious and far more important.

Stretching past him on the ground was the shadow of Romaine Borger. That shadow twitched, then shifted in such a was as to draw Slow Bob around in a whirling effort, the movement having all the deceptive sluggishness so typical of him.

Even as Slow Bob turned, Borger was saying, "An' anyway, Cryder, you won't have no further need for this water. Never no more!"

Borger's gun was coming out! Slow Bob saw the meaning of this visit now. Borger had come here to kill him. With that knowledge a fever in his mind, Slow Bob still showed no evidence of anger—only a trace of puzzlement and doubt.

SLOW BOB had no gun, no weapon of any kind except his hands. He had trained those great muscular hands to be gentle, yet they had not lost their power. And the snake-like grip he laid upon Borger's gun wrist jerked the man forward and broke his arm bone cleanly.

The gun fell to the ground and Borger slid to his face, screaming. Apparently quite unmoved by the abortive treachery of the assault, Slow Bob stooped over to pick up the gun. And in that half lowering of his great height, his life was saved.

A bullet screamed over his head. His ear drums dinned with the concussion of an exploding gun. It surprised Slow Bob. But, because it was his way, he kept his eyes on that fallen weapon, wrapped his fingers around the butt and only then turned his eyes to Romaine Borger.

In his left hand, the man held a stingy pocket gun which he was bringing to bear now for a second shot. Slow Bob was too far away to use his hands. Yet he knew that in that miserable little pocket weapon lay all the power and deadliness of the huge pistol he held in his hand, unless. . . .

Calmly, and without the slightest hint of passion, Slow Bob pointed his weapon, squeezed the trigger and shot Romaine Borger dead.

He was given no time to contemplate the horror of his act. Rageful shouting broke from the fence about the spring. Bullets cut the air about Slow Bob, the echoes of the shots running out into the coulée.

Slow Bob straightened, turned his eyes to the spring. The two men ahorse were roaring at him, their pistols blazing. The two standing by the cut wire were throwing lead in a mad attempt to bring Slow Bob down. The unfairness of it all touched Slow Bob with the beginnings of anger. Calmly he emptied the dead man's gun at them. Then, through that hail of death slugs, he walked untouched to the door.

His questing fingers found the big rifle by the jamb. He levered a shell into the barrel as he moved again into the clear. He brought the weapon leisurely to his shoulder, sighted deliberately—at a time when other, more excitable men, would have been triggering madly.

Something plucked at his shoulder,

leaving a sting like that of an angry bee. Slow Bob's impersonal attitude gave way to a rush of rage that seemed to film his eyes with red. Still he could shoot coolly, measuring each target as if it had been a deer he coveted for meat.

As though in a dream, he saw the first rider pitch backward over the tail of his horse, saw the mount of the second one crumple under him, the rider starting to run, then throwing his hands up with a shrill scream as he pitched to his face. One of the pair at the spring spun like a dervish, whirled blindly across the wire and hung there like a limp bundle of clothes.

The surviving one vaulted into his saddle, jabbed home the spurs and raced for safety. The hombre fired back over his shoulder in a last mad attempt to destroy the cool man who had downed his mates.

There was something very terrible about the care Slow Bob took with that next bead. Allowing ever so little for the gentle breeze that blew across the flats, and a little more for the speed of the galloping horse, he shot again—and the last of that murderous crew was dead, spread-eagled on the parched prairie floor, gazing sightlessly up at the brassy sky.

FOR LONG minutes, Slow Bob stood planted where he was, staring into nothingness rather than at the execution he had wrought. Then, as the red haze of anger left his eyes, his face showed momentary shock—much as a man might look when just awakened to a stunning surprise.

A sigh gusted from his lungs and his heavy shoulders shifted. Like a man weary beyond words, he stirred himself into motion, walked to the cabin door and reached for his cleaning rod. Meticulously he swabbed out the rifle barrel. He always cleaned his rifle after shooting. Then he reloaded the piece and put it carefully back in its accustomed place.

Those simple acts had been something for him to tie to. Now that they were taken care of, his thoughts were dragging their picket ropes. A mournful look came to his face, and misery to his eyes. As though to relive an ugly dream, he gazed at the stiffening form of Romaine Borger, then walked from body to body until he had looked upon the other four. He felt a pang of disappointment that there was no life in any one of them.

For a few bad moments, Slow Bob was prey to remorse. He had never killed a man. He had never even shot at a man. The book of his life had been patiently turned pages of friendliness. Now five men had come along to shatter the very essence of trust, to plunge him into violence and leave him shaken and bewildered.

Vainly, Slow Bob tried to refuel the slow fires of his earlier anger. Why had Borger tried to kill him? Why had they made him do this thing? But anger would not come; it was not his way. Miserably he told himself he had done nothing that was not his full right to do. He had shot in self-defense, from first to last. No man could hold that against him. And yet that very thought filled him with a new and startling emotion.

Fear! As long as he could remember back, Slow Bob had never been afraid. Now he was. He was desperately afraid of that vast intangible thing called the law. Romaine Borger was a power on these ranges. He had heard them say Borger's influence alone had elected the last sheriff. Borger was rich, important, respected. What could Bob Cryder say to the law to prove that he had shot only in self-defense?

The more Slow Bob reflected upon that, the more frightened he became. They would call it murder. They would try him and, because he had no witnesses, they would hang him by the neck until he was dead.

With an effort, Slow Bob got hold of himself. But that momentary yielding to fear had solidified a thought in his mind. Borger and his men had showed him what two long years of drought had been unable to make him see. He was finished here, wiped out, along with Borger and his men. Sulphur Creek range would know none of them again.

Calm now, he set to packing his few effects, saddled his horse, tied a full canteen to the horn and his meager roll behind the cantle. Without a backward look at the little scene that had held all his hopes and plans and dreams, he spurred away toward the west. And as he rode, the shadows of swirling buzzards fell between him and the sun, touching him with the ominous shadows of their wings.

CHAPTER TWO

Lonely Campfire

THE DETAILS of Slow Bob's flight were only vague to him throughout that day and all the following night. Dawn found him on the Sweetwater River, without any knowledge of crossing the mountain. He had no recollection of the rugged climb or the long descent into Sweetwater Valley.

His horse was jaded and Slow Bob was sick with weariness as he stripped off the saddle, tethered the beast in the dry willows, drank his fill from the meager flow in the wash and went to sleep. When he awoke it was night. He was hungry and reluctant to leave the river and its life saving water. But the law would be after him, he knew. He must not tarry.

After saddling, he struck blindly north toward the badlands of the Popo Agie. Next morning he breakfasted with a sheep herder who struggled to keep his little flock alive where a lusty spring had once spread across a sheltered flat. The man was glad for Slow Bob's company, fed him well on mutton and sour bread. And though the man and his charges were miserable specimens, Slow Bob found himself envying the herder and his security. There were worse things, he mused, than starvation and defeat.

With the man's generous handout of food tied to his saddle, Slow Bob rode on into the badlands, now a dry and grassless confusion of cut coulées, knife ridges and dry flats. There was no game, no feed for his animal, no water to replenish his canteen or to slack his pony's thirst. Nothing but barren miles that had to be put between himself and the vengeful arm of the law.

Once he flushed a thin and ragged-coated coyote from out a thicket, watched the animal tear madly away with desperate zigzagging swiftness. There had been a time when Slow Bob would have delighted in dropping that predatory beast. But now he made no move for the scabbarded rifle under his saddle fender. Indeed, he felt sorry for the starving creature, and for the first time in his life knew the panic that hunted animals feel. He himself felt the same way now. He too was hunted, striving to outrun his shadow in the same zigzag way.

His hope that he would find water before night proved vain. There was nothing but d r o u g h t, dying verdure, impalpable dust and the bones of cattle and wildlings grown white in the blinding glare. With the last of the afterglow fading, Slow Bob made a camp, half-emptied his canteen into his hat to water his pony, and risked the danger of a fire to brew coffee to satisfy his inner needs.

He was tying up the uneaten part of his food when a horseman came galloping around a point. He came so quickly as to preclude the possibility of Slow Bob's seeking cover. For one bad moment, fear was a fever within Bob, so sure was he that this was the law. He

lunged for his grounded saddle—and his rifle. He jerked the weapon free and up, but the rider was lifting his arms, his face showing traceries of fear. His voice rose through the stillness.

"No offense, pardner! I wasn't lookin' to find no one here in these howlin' badlands. I reckon you scared me as bad as I scared you."

It made Slow Bob feel a little foolish for his panic. The man was patently just a common cowhand. Morover, he was riding in from the wrong direction for one following Slow Bob's trail.

Bob grinned and said, "'Tain't much of a place to expect company, mister. Light down and rest your saddle."

THE COWBOY seemed glad to do just that. He swung down to loosen the cinch and turn his pony free. Then in the twilight he hunkered down, threw a few more twigs on the fire and rolled a cigarette with expert fingers. He declined Bob's offer of food, mumbling something about having eaten at a place called Washakie.

Hunkered across the blaze from one another, they talked. Whatever had happened to hold up the rain thisaway? How much time you reckon could pass without clouds formin' in the sky? Mebbyso this was God's judgment against big cattlemen growing too rich and too arrogant. How else could the little fellows cut the big ones down to their size without the help of something like this? Thus they conversed on the things cow folk talk about when they meet together over a cigarette or a glass of whiskey.

Slow Bob found this man pleasant and affable, a welcome companion against the loneliness of the badlands. All his fears were allayed, but still, after they had talked an hour, the man fell silent—and Slow Bob caught the fellow's eyes upon him with a strangely searching look.

He met that gaze, with little electric tingles of warning running along his spine and the first stirrings of doubt inside him. The cowboy had dropped upon his knees now, and a queer little smile trembled across his thin flat lips.

"Say," he said, with a strange tightness to his voice, "I think I know who you are. If I ain't way off in my calculations, yo're Bob Cryder, the killin' gunnie who shot down Romaine Borger and four of his men, down on Sulphur Creek."

Slow Bob was genuinely startled. How swiftly word of things like that sped across the rangeland! How hopeless it made his chance of winning free appear! He parried for time.

"What's that you said?" he asked, shamming puzzlement.

The man flapped a scornful left hand at him. "Oh, you don't need to rub that saddle soap on me, Cryder. Do I look dumb? You think I'm running around these dried-up badlands for my health? What you need is some smart jigger who'll tell you where the law won't be on yore tail."

Slow Bob regarded him with widening eyes—not so much because of his words, but more because of the sudden change that had taken place in him. His lips were pressed flat now in a hard grim line. His eyes had become slitted, brittle, dangerous. This was no common cowhand. With this changed front, every line of him screamed desperado, badman . . . maybe killer.

Thoughtfully, Slow Bob said, "I reckon you're right, stranger. You know of such a place as that?"

"I sure do!" the man cackled, and his attitude of waiting was very real.

"Where?" Slow Bob said.

"Hell!" snapped his erstwhile pleasant companion. "An' that's where you're goin' for killin' my brother Romaine an' four of his best men!"

Even as he spoke, his gun was flashing out. Slow Bob had time only to rise from

his haunches before the bullet hit him fairly in the body, driving him backward and to the ground.

LYING there on his back, looking up at the sky, Slow Bob could feel the twitching of his muscles and that terrible numbness creeping over him. Yet his brain was clear and alive. He followed every move and action of the man who had shot him. Fully expecting another slug, he saw the man's form loom above him, leering down. He saw those cruel lips curl, felt the moist impact of spat saliva upon his face.

"All right, feller," the man's words came, as from afar. "You're safe from the law now—safe in hell. And I've squared for Romaine."

Slow Bob heard him walk to his horse. There was the creak of leather, the slosh of Bob's own canteen and a diminishing beat of hoofs as the man rode away with Slow Bob's pony in tow. It was always a mystery to Slow Bob how he commanded the strength to roll over for that look at his saddle. His rifle still rested there, just where he had laid it. And that knowledge, combined with his soul-felt protest against the injustice of this thing, gave him the incentive and the power to start dragging his wounded body toward that gun.

He didn't deserve this penalty for the thing he had done down on Sulphur Creek. He had not earned the pain he was suffering now, nor the slow death that was inevitable from gun shot fever, without horse or water. He must have that horse and canteen. Already he could feel the need of it.

Hand over hand, inch by inch, he dragged himself along the ground, without thought of what he could possibly do once he had that gun. It seemed to take him an incredible time to reach the rifle and lever a shell into the breech. Painfully he drew himself to a sitting pasture, leaning back against the saddle horn and staring out into the gathering darkness whence that treacherous killer had ridden.

To his ears came the rattle of stones under the horses' hoofs. His eyes went to the sound. And there, where a big, red rising moon showed its disc above the ridge, the figure of a rider was silhouetted. It was more than Slow Bob could have hoped for. He drew in a lungful of breath, called upon all his forces and loosed a hoarse croak.

"Hey . . . Borger!"

It seemed to transfix the killer. The hombre drew rein, swept out his gun, swiveled in the saddle to lace the blackness below with a stream of pistol fire. It took but a matter of moments, but they were moments more precious than gold to Slow Bob Cryder. It gave him time to lift the dead weight of that rifle, fix that silhouette in his sights and fire.

Crashing echoes swelled to a high pitch, ran into the dead-end coulees and died away to silence. The echoes of pistol fire, the heavy overtones of rifle repercussions and the shrill reverberations of a dying man's scream were gone then.

The silhouette of a riderless horse against the moon grew dim in Slow Bob's vision. Those crashing echoes failed in his ears. He no longer had the strength to hold the rifle, and it slipped from his numbing fingers. He swayed sidewise from his saddlehorn support, fell flat, and knew no more.

CHAPTER THREE

Salvation Ranch

THE MOON was looking down from the zenith when Slow Bob became conscious again. He was weak, sick inside, but clear of mind. His questing fingers went inside his shirt to explore the wound. It throbbed like a demon in his side. He had lost a lot of blood, which accounted for his weakness and fever. But his misery seemed to pass in the glad

knowledge that the killer's bullet had struck his ribs, glanced off beneath the flesh, rimming his body almost to the backbone before it emerged. He held the flattened leaden slug in his fingers now.

Humbly grateful to a kind fate, he drew himself painfully to a sitting posture and looked about. Yonder in the moonlight, two horses browsed upon anemic wild rose and berry bushes. And toward them, Slow Bob crawled.

Each movement was agony as he inched along like a snail. As he neared the two brutes, the one that had belonged to Borger threw up its head, snorted and cakewalked nervously away. Slow Bob's canteen hung from the horn of its saddle; the sloshing of its scant supply of water was a torture in his ears.

For a moment, Slow Bob feared his own animal would catch the virus of the other's panic. But the wind was right, and the beast was still jaded and hungry. So, with no particular effort, he made the animal's side and pulled himself up its foreleg. It was a herculean task to draw himself up by the mane and gain the beast's back. It was just as difficult catching the saddled mount and transferring to its back. Slow Bob was spent and sick and dizzy when he made it. And for a long time he sat there, legs dangling, clinging to the horn, fighting off wave upon wave of nausea.

When he had rested a little, he lifted the canteen from the horn, drank and was refreshed. But there was terror in contemplating the dread truth that only a few swallows of water remained to see him through the arid miles. What would he do when his supply was gone, he asked himself? What could he do, anyway?

Mechanically he laced his fingers around the horn, pointed his pony's head north and let it drift. He experienced alternating periods of light and blackness, as if cloud patches moved across the face of the moon. Yet there were no clouds—only heat and the jolting agony of the horse's forward movement. Fearing he would fall from the saddle during some dark period, Slow Bob loosened his rope, tied himself into the saddle.

Then, after an eon of agony, the night was gone and the sun beat upon him with a fierce, implacable heat. Thirst tortured him and he drained the canteen. A film spread across his eyes. Ahead the landscape danced, shimmering crazily. He saw cool lakes, rimmed by banks of verdant trees. The trail became a river, running bank to bank with cold, sweet snowwater. Sometimes Slow Bob cried out in delirium.

Now, far ahead, he glimpsed a house. But he knew it for just another hallucination. One moment the structure was tiny, like some grotesque doll house. Then suddenly it would be lifted as by some giant hand, assuming enormous proportions, vibrating, wavering, haunting him with its nearness.

Though attaching no importance to this vision, Slow Bob found himself intrigued by one feature of it. At times, when it seemed so near he could almost touch it, he found himself marveling at the little red flower that bloomed in a box at one of the windows. If nothing else proved this a dream, that flower did. There had been no flowers in this god-forsaken land for two long bitter years. There never would be. God had forgotten this country. Yes . . . and God had forgotten him.

The little red flower grew like an obsession. It grew until he could make out its petals and its shadings of color, ranging from deep crimson at its heart to pale rose at its scalloped edges. The vision became so real and the house behind it so substantial that Slow Bob drew rein lest he ride right through it and find it gone.

The flower in its framing circle of greenery swayed in the light breeze, and Slow Bob reached out his hand to pick it.

Then a door beside the window opened and a girl stood there. She was a beautiful girl. That too could have been nothing but an hallucination. There were no beautiful girls in this howling desert. Had a girl elected to stay here, her beauty would have dried and shriveled like the vanished grass and flowers. Yes, it was a dream, because it was fading now as daylight fades at the ending of twilight. His consciousness was fading. Slow Bob's weight hung limply against the rope. . . .

SLOW BOB was thinking of that little red flower when he awoke. But when he opened his eyes, he was looking instead at the feminine face he had seen in the doorway—a beautiful, golden-tanned face framed in a halo of wavy brown hair and penciled with a finely chiseled nose and firm purposeful lips. Deep-set blue eyes regarded him with warm compassion, and there was the same music in her voice he had heard in the dream river of his delirium.

"Thank God!" she murmured as if to herself. "He's better."

Then she dropped into a chair beside the bed Slow Bob lay upon, and was feeding spoonsful of strong broth between his lips. When she had emptied the bowl, she sponged off his face with a cool wet rag.

"There," she said. "Does that make you feel better?"

"Yes," said Slow Bob, striving to muster strength to ask the thousand questions that boiled in his mind.

The girl's eager interest seemed to wane, and Slow Bob was amazed at the deep lines of weariness on her face.

"Then I will sleep," she said. "I have been up with you all night."

She held herself very stiffly as she walked into an adjoining room and closed the door. Silence fell over the cabin, broken only by the moan of the endless dry wind about the eaves, wind that sent little rivulets of dust running through the cracks in the clapboards.

Slow Bob's eyes were busy. He noted the meanness of the room, the poor construction, the homemade furniture, the almost empty shelves beyond the heat-warped stove, and the meager pile of grubbed roots for fuel. Over all was dust.

He wondered where he was, into whose hands he had fallen. He wondered where the men folk were, if perhaps they had gone to fetch the law. But even that thought brought no alarm. What was to be, would be. There was little fight left in Slow Bob Cryder.

After awhile he slept, and when he awoke again it was night. A smoky lamp burned on the rude table. The room reeked with cooking things, and the girl sat again at his bedside, looking fresher and more cheerful.

There was broth and well boiled meat

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against his weakness. But most important of all, there was the smile of a friendly human being and the warming quality of the girl's presence. He savored it all, knowing it must be so very, very fleeting.

HE FOUND the halting words to thank her for taking him in and caring for him. She shook her head piteously.

"I am the one who should thank you," she said fervently. "When you came riding to the door, so desperately ill and helpless, I believed I was going crazy with loneliness and the bitter struggle to survive. You are the first human I've seen in two months. Even if you had died on my hands, forcing me to dig another grave, I would still have been glad you came."

"You mean," said Slow Bob wonderingly, "you have been here by yourself for two months? That you have had a grave to dig . . . alone?"

She smiled sadly. "Graves," she corrected. "My father broke his leg. He was old and we could not save him. We buried him out under the box elder, mother and I. Mother said the digging was too much for her, that she had overdone her strength. But it was only that she hadn't the will to go on. She and father had been together for so many years she couldn't remain apart from him. Even though she loved me, she was gone to him in a week. And I—I was alone."

Bob looked at her in amazement. "And you have stayed here alone," he repeated. "For what? What is there here for you?"

Bleakness touched the girl's eyes. "Nothing," she murmured. "Not a thing. Many times I've been at the point of leaving, but there was nothing to go to. And the sheep . . . I could not go away and leave them."

"Sheep?" echoed Slow Bob.

"My father's flock," she explained. "What's left of the poor starving creatures. They're all I have in the world. Except for my digging out the spring and bailing water for them, they would have died long ago."

Slow Bob studied her, wondering why she showed no curiosity about him or his wound. And he began to understand, for the first time, what had held him to his little stove-up spread on Sulphur Creek. It was those starving cattle he had struggled so hard to save. A pang of pity for them hit him now. He knew exactly what this girl was up against. The only difference between them was that he, a man, could have left and gone to something else. But what outlook was there for her, a lonely girl?

"When I get up," he said simply, "I'll pitch in and pay you back a little for what you've done for me."

"When you get up," she warned him, "you must not overdo your strength. You've been badly hurt. You must not feel you are in my debt. When you are strong enough, feel free to ride where you were going. But until that time comes, you're welcome here."

"I may have to ride," Slow Bob said, "in a hurry!" And silence fell between them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bitter Fight

SLOW BOB was strong and he had lived cleanly. That's why, before many days, he was able to move from his bed into the sun, surprising the girl who labored in the pit where once there had been a flowing spring. She came to him, strangely solicitous, taking him by the arm and insisting he return to his bed. She had no desire, she told him solemnly, to dig another grave under the leafless box elder.

But Slow Bob would not have it so. The wound in his side was healing nicely

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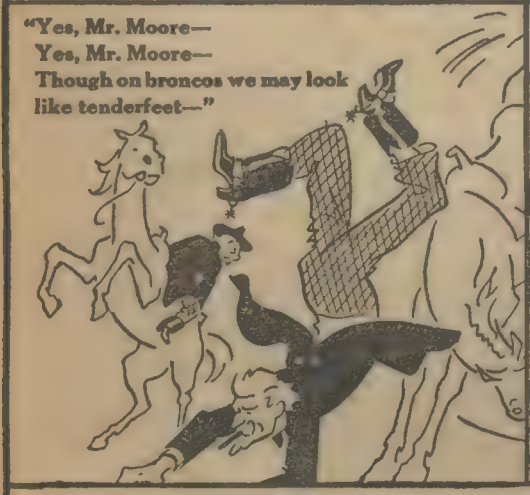

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and, thanks to the girl's nursing, he was building back lost blood and strength. He looked over the outfit thoughtfully, trying to visualize it as it had been before the drought. It reminded him a lot of his own place, being similarly situated. But now it was only another spot in a great desolation, with a flock of bony sheep clamoring at the fence enclosing the spring.

The scene was tonic to Slow Bob. There were many things to be done, tasks that no woman should undertake. To these tasks he turned his hand as day followed day. First, he wrecked an old shed that once had housed chickens. With that lumber and a can of nails, he stopped up the cracks in the house against the ever-seeping dust.

With long periods of rest between, he lent the girl a hand with the harder work. And when he was able, he relieved her entirely. Each day he dug in the spring hole, swinging up the buckets of water to be dumped into the trough. And he took to driving the sheep out to feed upon the coarse browse and shriveled cactus.

Each day was as hot, as dry and as unrelieved by clouds, as the one before. But Slow Bob was finding a fuller pleasure, joy he had hungered for and never tasted. When he took the sheep out of mornings, the girl went with him, striding free, her fine head thrown up as if to defy the fierce sun.

There was a crisp coolness about her that delighted Slow Bob. Just to look at her was like a refreshing draught to one suffering from thrist. Each day brought home to him the full significance of her character. She was a woman of the land, strong inside, self contained. How glorious it would be to go through life with a woman like that.

The thought startled Slow Bob and he cast it from him, only to have it bounce back like an echo. How glorious. . . .

Once she twitted him about his eternal watching of the skylines. "Don't worry about the rain," she told him. "When it gets ready, it will come. There'll be big water for the parched land to drink in, for the dry seeds and thirsty roots to absorb. When the time comes, Bob, you will see a miracle happen here on the range."

But Slow Bob was not watching those skylines for rain clouds. He watched for riders—with only one thought to assuage his fear. For long weeks this girl had seen no human but himself. In such isolation lay safety of a sort—safety from the law . . . for a killer of men.

OF EVENINGS, when supper was over and the dishes done, they sat outside the door, watching the twilight creep in, keening the growing coolness and each giving himself to his own thoughts.

Slow Bob liked her silence at such times. In fact, he had found nothing about her he did not like. She was his kind of people, and he admitted to himself now that he wanted her. Yet he knew full well how impossible it was. They might live out their entire lives in a place like this without anyone coming to apprehend him. Then again the law might come riding in at any minute.

Slow Bob fought long battles with himself about this. And each evening when they took their seats outside the door, he would voice the same empty apology.

"I really shouldn't be sitting here tonight. Reckon tomorrow I'll be riding on."

And always the girl's answer was the same, calm and strong. "Whenever you feel it necessary. I am very grateful for your help . . . and your company."

But tomorrow it would be the same, save for certain tightenings of the bonds that held him. Days stretched into weeks, weeks into a month. Then one evening as they sat together, it came to Slow Bob with a start that neither had asked any-

thing about the other. Much had been taken for granted. Why . . . not even names had been spoken.

With almost boyish embarrassment, Bob said, "My last name is Cryder. Bob Cryder. They call me Slow Bob."

"Slow Bob," she murmured after him. "It fits you. I'm Faith Speakman."

"Faith!" The name trembled on Slow Bob's tongue. "Your mother couldn't have named you better if she had looked ahead and seen what you would have to go through here. Faith Speakman. . . . I like that."

She gave him her hand, and desperately he clung to it. He experienced a bad five minutes of panic and self-pity that there was no other way than to give her up. He was a killer. She was . . . Faith. After awhile he released her hand, and they sat in silence until the moon came up and drowsiness reminded them that there must be rest against the rigors of the morrow's fight to survive.

Slow Bob sought his bed, but not to sleep. Whatever happened, he told himself, he had gained something this night that even death could not take from him. He had held a treasure in his hand. Memory of it would be a mighty bolster in the days to come.

Day by day the water hole failed. Now it took them both to get water enough for the suffering sheep. Standing in the well, bathed with sweat in the humid sticky heat, Slow Bob lifted each pail high above his head for the girl to catch and empty. Then he must wait until the tiny seep had paid out enough to fill the next bucket.

It was a losing fight, and Slow Bob knew it. But if the girl knew, she gave no sign. Nor did Bob mention it. Deeper and deeper, he dug the hole, until Faith was pulling the bucket up with a rope. Finally it got so that an hour would pass before enough water had collected to make another lift necessary.

Thus the day came when a single bucket of water was the capacity of the well. And they needed that for themselves. The sheep went without. That night the girl wept, her sobs tearing the heart out of Slow Bob. And before dawn the following morning he crept from the house without waking her, saddled his horse and rode, scouting the breaks of the surrounding hills for a more favorable location to dig.

That night he returned long-faced, both he and his horse suffering for a drink. The girl came out to meet him.

"You didn't find it, did you?" she asked, surprising him.

Slow Bob said, "No," and they just looked at one another dumbly.

Then, as if some agreement had been reached, Slow Bob said, "You go inside, Faith. I'll do it."

He picked up an axe from the root pile, strode to the panicky flock of sheep blatting around the failing well. He was busy there for an hour at a job that sickened him. Weary of arm and covered with blood, he was skinning out the first carcass, stripping the spare flesh and hanging it over the wire to dry when the girl came out to halt him.

Frozen faced, she said, "There's no need of that, Slow Bob. This is the end of my father's dream, my mother's and mine. The well went dry today. I have two buckets in the house. That will be enough for the horse and for us until morning."

Slow Bob showed no emotion. "Tomorrow," he said tonelessly, "it will rain," and walked with her to the house.

BUT tomorrow it was not raining, and in the well were only a few cups of water. At breakfast Slow Bob looked at the girl.

"Faith," he asked, "what will you do. Where can you go?"

She studied over that, then shook her

head. "I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "But somewhere there must be a place for a girl to work. Maybe I can get a job as chambermaid in a hotel, or waiting on table." She halted, searching his face for encouragement.

But Slow Bob showed none of his inner feelings. He felt deep pity for her The little towns of these burned up ranges were sorely hit. Hotel men and restaurant keepers were not hiring help. Even had they been able to do so, all such openings must surely be filled by now, leaving nothing for those who had stuck it out. That was the price of holding on to the bitter end.

Affecting surprise, Slow Bob said, "You . . . you work in a hotel or a restaurant? That ain't seemly, somehow. Haven't you folk back East somewhere?"

"I have an aunt," she answered, "in Vermont." Then she threw her hands wide. "But even if she would take me, how could I get back there?"

Slow Bob stared out at the parched landscape and for a long time remained like that, feeling the impact of her eyes against him. During those moments he asked himself over and over, "Why have I got this coming to me? What have I ever done that wasn't right? What has this brave girl done to be punished like this?"

His mind ran afield in quest of an answer. And thus he came upon a thought, a startling thought that froze him in his seat, that turned him cold and left his eyes as bleak as death. When he spoke, he did not look at Faith.

"I'll see that you get to Vermont," he said. "I had nearly forgotten. I know where there's money I can lay hands on. In Washakie. I'll get it for you. You've got it coming after what you've done for me. Gather up your things."

"Slow Bob!" Her eyes were on him hungrily and her voice vibrantly low. "You want me to leave for Vermont?"

Slow Bob had always prided himself on his tremendous power of will. He had to call upon it all now to keep from screaming out his denial, to keep from telling her she was the only thing he wanted from life.

"There's water in Vermont," he said softly. "And things are cool and green. Yes, I would want you in a place like that. Come on, let's get started."

There were no further words between them. Neither seemed to want them. And a half hour later Slow Bob's horse was carrying them both toward Washakie, thirty miles away, carrying Faith toward Vermont and Slow Bob toward . . . hell.

CHAPTER FIVE

Out of the Drought

THE details of those miles across the drear prairie were lost upon Slow Bob. Faith rose before Slow Bob on the saddle, her nearness a pain, yet an exquisite pleasure. His arms were on either side of her as he held the reins, his eyes fixed upon the half moon of curls cascading over her shapely neck. It was, he knew, as near as he would ever come to holding her in his arms.

By the perversity born of the knowledge that he would hold her thus so briefly, the miles sped by, and then they were entering the bleak little town of Washakie. The few denizens of the town who were about stared strangely at the man and woman riding along the main street on the bony horse. But by this time they had grown used to strange scenes wrought by the drought, and this one stirred little animation in them.

Slow Bob's eyes were busy. Spotting the sheriff's office, he rode toward it, dropped down at the rack and lifted Faith from the saddle. His face was a mask now, his eyes unreadable and his mouth a grim line. From his saddle scabbard, he drew the rifle he had already used to kill

six men, levered a shell into the barrel and cocked it.

A little awed by the change in him, Faith watched these movements with growing fear.

"What—what are you going to do?" she asked.

Slow Bob brought his eyes to her, a wistful boyish hunger in his face.

In much the same way that a small boy might have asked for a piece of bread and butter, he said, "Faith, would you hate me very much if I was to—to kiss you?"

It startled her, brought glints to her blue eyes and twin spots of red to her cheeks. "Why—why no, Slow Bob," she said. "I could never hate you . . . for anything."

His arms went about her and he tenderly kissed her. The wonder of it held him in its grip for one brief moment, then again he was steel and ice. He pressed the gun into her hands.

"Hold this," he commanded. "It is loaded and cocked, so be careful of the trigger. I'm going into the sheriff's office. You walk behind me with the gun held before you."

"But why?" she demanded.

"You will learn why," he said sternly. "You don't know this sheriff. You being behind me with a gun may help me a lot to get this money. But remember this, Faith—I'll do all the talking. And there is to be no shooting. Just hold the gun and come on."

He turned on his heel and led the way. The girl followed him step by step, staring strangely at the weapon she held clutched in her fingers. She was obviously puzzled and distraught.

They mounted the low steps. With purposeful stride, Slow Bob crossed the porch, moved to the open portal and then quickly threw his hands aloft and stepped across the threshold.

He heard the gasp of the girl behind him and knew she too had entered. But his eyes were on the grizzled man who sat behind the desk in the corner by the window. He was Sheriff Allen Fullwider, the officer Romaine Borger was reputed to have elected.

THE sheriff was staring over the top of his opened newspaper at this surprising tableau. At last he came to his feet.

"What is the meaning of this, ma'am?" he demanded. "Who is this man you're gun-herding to the jail house?"

Slow Bob took the play, his lips curling, his voice a snarl. "She got me, Sheriff! Took me cold and pretty, damn her soul!" He let his face soften as if in admiration. "At that, she's plenty smart and gritty. An' she sure earned that thousand dollar reward Custer County offers for the capture of its killers."

"Killers?" snapped the sheriff, stiffening. "You interest me, feller. Who are you and who are you supposed to have killed?"

The girl cried out. "Don't listen to him, Sheriff! He must be crazy! I'm not—"

"Shut up!" snapped Slow Bob. "I'll do the talking here. You've done enough." And then, to the lawman: "I'm Bob Cryder, Sheriff, from Sulphur Creek."

The lawman gasped. "My God! The man who killed Romaine Borger!"

"And four of his saddlemates," put in Bob.

The Sheriff sank weakly into his chair, staring at Slow Bob as if he were a ghost. After awhile he broke the silence. He addressed the girl with scorn in his voice.

"So you brought in Slow Bob Cryder, ma'am? You hoped to take down a thousand dollars blood money on his hide. Is that it?"

"No!" Faith Speakman almost screamed it.

"Yes!" bellowed Slow Bob.

The sheriff looked queerly from one to

the other. "Well, ma'am," he said, "you're sure to be complimented for throwin' down on a dangerous man an' bringing him in to answer to the law. It's true Custer County offers a thousand dollars for murderers. But the commissioners are going to be mighty hard to convince that Slow Bob Cryder has done murder."

"What are you talking about?" broke in Bob. "I admit I done murder. If Romaine Borger and his four riders ain't enough, there's the younger Borger, Romaine's brother. I killed him, too. I can tell you right where to go to find what's left of his carcass. You gotta give her that money, Sheriff! You gotta pay her that thousand dollars!"

Bob's heart was full of fear now, fear that this crazy plan of his would backfire, fear that this tool of Borger's would hold him to answer for the killings without making the reward available to the girl. He dared not look at Faith. Only a few moments before she had returned his caress. Now she must be hating him, loathing him.

Once more the sheriff rose from his chair, only to drop back again. The blood was ebbing from his face. From behind Slow Bob came Faith's voice, as discordant as the rasp of a file across steel.

"Sit down, Sheriff! And keep your hands in sight. If you make one move, the commissioners will be looking for another killer . . . and another sheriff!" Her voice changed. "Bob, you were a fool to do this thing and to think that I would use money obtained in this way. I'll not let you make such a sacrifice. Get out there to your horse, and ride. Ride, you understand? Fast and far! I have no place to go and nothing better to do than to sit right here keeping the sheriff company while you get a good long start toward freedom. Now go!"

Slow Bob whirled upon her. She had backed out of his reach, and the gun was at her shoulder, held levelly and firmly.

"Faith!" he protested. "Don't you understand? I'm a killer. A murderer!"

"A killer, maybe," she said calmly. "But never a murderer. Not Slow Bob Cryder. If you're telling the truth about killing these men, then I know you had a reason for killing them—an honest reason. Now get out! And . . ." Her voice broke ". . . goodbye!"

Slow Bob stared at her in amazement, joy and regret clashing within him, holding him tongue-tied.

A CHOKING sound from the sheriff drew his eyes. He turned to stare. The lawman was doubled over, convulsed with mirth, holding his sides with both hands.

"So she threw down on you, eh Cryder?" he roared. "An' took yuh neat? Fetched you in here for a thousand dollars that isn't even offered? Well, it was a neat play, son, well acted out to extract a thousand dollars from the treasury of Custer County. . . ." Sight of Bob's beaten, crestfallen look threw him into another paroxysm of mirth.

"Steady, Cryder!" he choked at last. "Don't take it so hard. You figured it out with good intentions, I betcha, to see that a mighty fine girl got the money she needed. Well, at that, it would be cheaper for the county to hang you and give her a thousand dollars than to do what we're gonna have to do. Look!"

From a drawer he took a sheaf of dodgers, spread them on the desk. Slow Bob stared. Faith lowered her rifle to move up beside him.

On those sheets were the likenesses of six men. And though the names on two of them were not Borger, the faces were those of the Borger brothers nonetheless. The other four were the punchers who had tried to kill Slow Bob at Sulphur Creek and had died instead. One thousand dollars was offered for each of them,

dead or alive. The sheriff was talking again. . . .

"This is the Bad Water Gang," he was saying. "It was one of the worst outfits of horse thieves and road agents Wyoming has ever known. The finding of the five bodies at your Sulphur Creek ranch was the first we had known that the R Slash B was an outlaw spread. Only two things worried us: Where in hell you'd gone, Cryder; an' what had become of young Borger, the last of the gang. Your own romantic notion of self-sacrifice removed my first worry, and your admission that you killed the last of the gang eases my mind most mortal. Custer County will pay you six thousand dollars for this job, Cryder. And I think there will be another two thousand coming to you from the Federal government, thanks to your stopping the theft of a hundred ponies stolen from the Shoshones on the Wind River Reservation." He beamed upon them. "A neat little sum, I'd say, to start housekeeping on."

The big heart in Slow Bob's chest leaped, and the fog of long months was lifting from his brain. A little ashamed, he turned to face Faith Speakman. Her face, transfigured with the warmth of affection, was turned up to him invitingly. He had an irresistible impulse to kiss her again, but before he could fire his courage to that fateful point, the air was suddenly vibrant with a dull concussion and a man-roar was lifting from the street.

The three in the office froze, listening. The town seemed suddenly to have gone mad. Men and women were rushing into the street. Yells and screams lifted, but they were more of joy than terror.

"Whatever from hell!" the sheriff ejaculated, and darted past Bob and the girl. They followed him wonderingly, pausing on the porch beyond the threshold.

Slow Bob's eyes ran along the street where the townfolk of Washakie stood, their eyes cast aloft. Some had their hands lifted as if in prayer. In his previous mental turmoil, Bob hadn't realized that the sky had grown gloomy, the sun hidden. Great banks of clouds rolled up from the southwest like a gray blanket. From somewhere came the mutterings of thunder. And already the first warm drops of rain were hissing into the thirsty dust!

Slow Bob murmured, "God!" Without conscious effort, his arm went about Faith Speakman and he crushed her to him. Together they stood, their faces uplifted to the weeping sky, lest they miss one precious drop of the miracle that was bringing salvation to a burned and thirst-tortured land.

THE END

CATTLE KING FROM PURGATORY

By NORMAN A. FOX

Big Dave arose, a moon-painted shadow. "Turn back," he called.

In twenty honest, fearless years, Big Dave Silver, King of the Lodgegrass Country, climbed to the top of the cattleland hierarchy—and bided his time for a chance to settle for the one blow that had ever smashed his pride. . . . When the day of reckoning came, he was ready to pay its cost—of ignominious dishonor!

BIG DAVE SILVER sat on the porch steps of his mansion-like ranch-house and studied the strained face of the rider who thundered across the flats toward him. Night was an hour old over the Lodgegrass country, but a rising moon painted the prairie and enabled Big Dave to see the tenseness of the young man crouching in the saddle. Trouble was riding with Buck Winston tonight. The signs sent something like a thrill through Big Dave Silver, because he had waited a long time for trouble to crowd Buck Winston.

He wasn't surprised that Buck Winston was bringing his troubles to him, for the youngster had no way of knowing that Big Dave hated him. Everyone came to Big Dave. They called him "King of the Lodgegrass Country." He did have a

regal look about him, with the moonlight etching his proud, haughty features, dappling the silver-speckled black mane that gave him a leonine appearance. Arbitrator, peace-maker and fighting leader, all in one, he had become the court of last appeal and the friend-in-need of a hundred far-flung cattlemen.

King of the Lodgegrass! The title smacked of the power that was his, the power he would use to ruin Buck Winston. But neither his face nor his voice betrayed the thought as he spoke to the young man who slithered to a stop before him.

"Light and set a spell, Buck," Big Dave invited cordially. "For a next-door neighbor, you don't call very often."

Buck Winston swung from the saddle. He was scarcely more than a boy, a pleasant looking, sandy-haired youngster, slender as a willow. But worry was sagging his shoulders tonight.

"Running somebody else's spread keeps a gent right busy," he explained.

Big Dave nodded his understanding. He knew that young Buck was the manager of the Double O, a spread owned by an Eastern syndicate. Eastern capitalists had rushed to invest in the cattle business in the valley of the Yellowstone, and most of their spreads were rodded by young punchers whose knowledge of cows had qualified them for the jobs. Usually the far-away owners were content to let these top-hands run things as they chose—so long as profits were made. And the Double O had been doing fair, Big Dave knew. He had made it his business to know a lot of things about Buck Winston's job.

"What can I do for you, Buck?" he asked without prelude.

"Well—uh—I'm wonderin' if you'd let me drive your south range beef over to the Double O for a day or two," the youngster stammered. "It's a queer favor to ask, and I reckon you should know why."

"The big bosses back East are sending somebody out to make a count," Big Dave suggested. "And the herd is short."

Buck colored. "That's it," he admitted slowly.

"YOU see," Buck said, "I've been reporting my stock losses short. It's plumb hard to make them dude bosses savvy that one critter out of ten dies in a year's time from winter losses, wolves or spring mirings. I didn't aim on being crooked, Silver. I figgered I could make the tally come out right with one good year."

"But they ain't waiting till fall to count up," Big Dave supplemented.

"That's why I need your help," Buck said eagerly. "All I want to do is fool 'em this once. That dude that'll be comin' probably don't know the south end of a critter from the north end. Brands won't mean anything to him—just figgers. All he'll do is count. . . . I'd be plumb obliged if I could have some of your stock to include in the count."

"You took a long risk," Big Dave said, shaking his massive head. "Why?"

"The job meant a lot to me," Buck confessed. "I was plumb anxious to make a showin', to hold it. I reckon you remember my dad, Silver, and likewise I guess you know he run our spread into the ground before he died. It's been up to me to take care of my mother since, and this Double O proposition looked like a chance to do that chore right. I didn't want to lose the job before I had a chance to prove myself. Sounds like a hell of an excuse, don't it?"

"You might blame rustlers for the shortage," Big Dave suggested.

"It wouldn't stick," Buck said ruefully. "Everybody is pretty proud of the job you done in chasin' Sig Roud and his crew of rustlers off the range a year ago, Silver. Before the dude was around a day, somebody'd tell him about that."

Big Dave stepped closer, placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and hoped the porch's shadow hid the exultation that must be gleaming in his eyes.

"Go home, Buck, and quit worrying," he said evenly. "I'll cover you—but that'll be our secret. Move your stock to the south range, and make sure your boys are in the bunkhouse tomorrow night—'cause I'll be adding a few head to your herd 'long about then."

"I'm thanking you," Buck said, his voice husky. "I don't leave the spread often, but I get around enough to know that every damn man in the Lodgegrass looks up to you. I can see why."

Big Dave frowned. "Never mind that," he said almost harshly.

BIG DAVE SILVER watched as the boy mounted. Then he stood beside the porch, a silent figure, and listened to the dying hoofbeats of departure. Afterwards he strode to the corral, saddled his own mount and turned his face toward the hills that fringed his ranch to the south and west. The moon looked down upon him, a tall, broad-shouldered man who rode as a king should ride.

His haughty face, fixed as chiseled granite, showed no sign of the emotion that rioted within him as he re-pictured Buck Winston making his plea. Buck Winston had seemed a lot like Mary Winston, his mother, then. That same worried look had spanned the gap of the years, carried Big Dave Silver back to another moon-drenched night when he had stood before Mary in the shadow of another ranch-house.

"I'm sorry, Dave," she had said. "I'm marrying Jack Winston—soon. I don't expect you'll be able to understand."

"I reckon I can understand," he had retorted, his voice vibrant with the hurt he fought to hide. "He's got his dad's spread—a big start. I've got nothing."

He had left her, checking her rushing words with a promise that had goaded him ever since. "I'm riding away," he said. "But I'll come back—and I'll climb to the top of the heap. I'll climb so high that the sun will be in Jack Winston's eyes whenever he looks at me."

Now he was Big Dave Silver, King of the Lodgegrass. He thought of that as his horse covered endless miles that belonged to him, miles stocked with prime beef. He'd climbed to the top of the heap—and Jack Winston had gone to the bottom. But the pride that Mary Winston had wounded would not let him be satisfied. That pride cried out that Jack Winston must be ruined, broken. But Jack Winston had cheated him by dying. Since then, Big Dave had transferred his hate to young Buck.

Lodgegrass didn't know about the feeling that festered inside Big Dave. Probably they had laughed or shaken their heads, according to their natures, when Mary had chosen Jack Winston instead of him. Big Dave had vanished for almost five years. When he returned the matter had been forgotten by his neighbors.

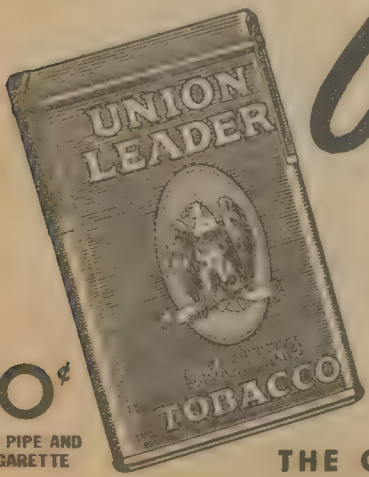
But Big Dave Silver hadn't forgotten—would never forget. That was why he was riding tonight. He was going to make sure that a lot of Double O cattle would be missing. The syndicate man would think that the herd tallied short because Buck Winston had sold cattle and pocketed the money. He would be branded as a crook, blacklisted in the range country. Maybe Mary Winston would wonder, then, if things might have been different if she had chosen Big Dave.

The narrow defile known as Bottleneck Pass marked the southern boundary of Big Dave's spread, and he passed through it and on up into the hills. It took hours of climbing, searching, to find what he sought. The moon stood directly overhead, when Big Dave dismounted, wormed through bushes to a cabin cleverly concealed in the shelter of a rocky wall.

A kind friend Then..and now

IN 1910—"I first smoked Union Leader when Joe Winders, who ran the general store over at the Forks, gave me some to try. 'Long as you live,' says Joe, 'you'll never meet up with a sweeter pipe tobaccy.' And after 28 years of smokin' Union Leader, I still think Joe was right."

TODAY: : ."Here I am 28 years later; still smoking Union Leader. When a tobacco is friendly and gentle and satisfying as long as that . . . it comes pretty close to makin' good."—Harry C. Bratt, Box 58, Hoosick, New York.



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THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

STRIDING to the cabin's door, he flung it open, stepped into a spacious low-ceilinged room, blue with tobacco smoke. A dozen men crowding about a table raised startled eyes from a poker game and stared in open-mouthed amazement as he stood framed in the doorway.

This was the lair of Sig Roud and his rustlers. Every man there knew—and hated—Big Dave Silver. But the very audacity of his entrance paralyzed them for a moment until one man broke the spell with an explosive snort and dived for a gun.

Another stopped his gesture, a thin-faced, ferret-eyed man—Sig Roud.

"Don't be a fool," Roud cautioned. "Silver's probably got a hundred men outside."

Big Dave eyed Roud contemptuously. "I'm alone, Roud," he said curtly. "I don't need men at my back when I call on your stripe. I've got a deal to make, and I'm asking you to step outside and talk it over."

"A deal?" Roud repeated incredulously, and his eyes glittered with suspicion.

He moved toward the door hesitantly. Big Dave knew that the man was weighing his instinctive dread of a trap against a desire to show no fear before his riders.

But Roud came—alone. And beneath the eaves of the cabin Big Dave spoke his piece tersely.

"Take your men through Bottleneck tomorrow night when the moon's an hour high. Cross my range and head into the south end of the Double O. You'll find cattle there—unguarded. Some will wear my brand, some Winston's. Take both. I'll see that no one stops you at either spread. Savvy?"

The moon glinted on Roud's harsh face. "I savvy," he jerked. "A trap for me, eh?"

Big Dave sneered. "If I wanted your scalp, I'd have come and gotten it long ago," he said. "As long as you've left the Lodgegrass alone, the Lodgegrass ain't bothered you. I'm letting you clean out the Double O for reasons of my own. You get the cattle—and you and your crew keep your mouths shut afterwards. Is that a deal?"

Roud's weasel eyes searched the face of Big Dave for a long moment. "I'll chance it," the rustler decided. "Reckon I can savvy that neighbors quarrel sometimes. What yuh got ag'in the Double O is none of my business, and I ain't worryin' about it so long as I can make a haul like that."

LATER, as Big Dave headed down to the flats again, he felt something akin to nausea. He had sold out a cattleman to the common foe, the rustler. He had stooped to bargain with range carrion. The stench remained in his nostrils. He tried to make himself believe that he was entitled to such an act. He'd done a lot for the Lodgegrass country. Now, if he turned his back on the range code this once it was his privilege, he argued.

He owed that much to himself, to see Mary Winston humbled for striking at the thing he valued the most—his pride.

To make Big Dave Silver's scheme air-tight only one thing remained to be done, and he took care of that the following evening. Just as the sun was beginning to sag behind the western hills, those same hills that hid Sig Roud and his crew, Big Dave called his grizzled range boss to the porch.

"Here's a little bonus for the boys," he said and extended a sheaf of checks. "Likely as not the whole bunch will head for town, so tell 'em to stop on the way and move our south range herd over to the south end of the Double O. I'm lending Buck Winston that bunch for a few days, but you don't need to pass that news to the crew. Just ride along and be sure they don't run the tallow off 'em."

The range boss grunted thanks, left.

Big Dave let a smile of satisfaction crease his haughty face. The foreman and the boys would go on to Lodgegrass, and there would be no one to stumble upon Sig Roud when the raid came off. And Dave's own riders wouldn't be suspicious, for it had been his policy to reward them occasionally with small bonuses. When Roud struck, the cowboys would be in town spending their checks, telling Lodgegrass that Big Dave Silver was a pretty swell gent.

A swell gent! After the riders had whooped away, Big Dave sat alone on the porch and watched the purple shadows of night tumble down the western slopes, creep across the rangeland. He'd still be a swell gent, even after tomorrow. Some of the truth would seep out and people would say that he'd tried to save Buck Winston's hide by lending the Double O cattle. They'd say it was too bad he had lost his own cattle by trying to help. Only Big Dave would know that he, himself, wasn't really a swell gent.

He had waited long and planned well. But now, with his hour of triumph near, doubts and misgivings arose to taunt him. He thrust them aside by thinking of Mary Winston and the long gone night when she had jilted him. It was easy to recall the poignant hurt that had been his—but the flame of his hatred did not burn so readily as it had before.

Smothering an oath, he arose to go inside. He'd waited too long for this chance. But now he couldn't let himself go soft.

He fortified himself with the thought that nothing could be done to alter his scheme, anyway.

But why should Dave think about stopping Roud? He wanted Buck Winston ruined, didn't he? To hell with it! He'd waited over twenty years for what tomorrow would bring.

Face frozen, Big Dave fought it out with himself, was still fighting when he heard roofs thundering across the flats. The moon, almost an hour old, showered luminosity, and Big Dave's eyes widened as they identified the rider. Mary Winston was coming to see him!

SHE reined short before the porch. Big Dave heard himself greeting her, inviting her to dismount, while his mind probed for the reason behind her visit. She swung from the saddle gracefully, a sweet-faced, dark-eyed little woman. In divided riding skirt and open-necked shirt, she looked almost girlish. It came to Dave that the years had been kind to Mary Winston in spite of her troubles.

He was still puzzled as he ushered her inside. They had met occasionally in Lodgegrass town through the years and chatted about such impersonal things as the weather. Tonight, though, Mary Winston hadn't come to talk of the weather.

"My boy has told me all about his book shortage," she said as he motioned her to a chair. "I want to thank you for your offer, Dave. But we won't be needing your cattle. We'll tell the syndicate man the truth."

Big Dave, with his arms folded, watched her glance take in the details of the richly furnished room. He was pretty proud of his home. He wondered if Mary was comparing the signs of his good fortune to the lot that had been hers.

"Telling the truth is liable to cost Buck his job," he reminded her.

"We've talked that over, he and I," she said. "I'd rather that he lost his job than held it by deceit—and he feels that I'm right. Just the same, Dave, it doesn't lessen what you tried to do for—for us. And I want you to know that we both appreciate it."

She arose, stepped toward the door. "We'll get along somehow," she said, and smiled. "There are worse things to lose than jobs. I want Dave to learn that."

"Dave?" he repeated in puzzlement.

Color flooded her cheeks and she avoided his stare. "My—my tongue slipped," she stammered. "Buck is a nickname that his father gave the boy. Dave is really his name."

Buck's real name was Dave Winston! Probably that didn't mean anything, but something in Mary's hesitant words told Big Dave Silver that it did. He crossed the room in a stride and his hands clamped almost fiercely on the woman's shoulders.

"Mary," he said, "I've got to know. Your boy . . . did you name him after me?"

"Yes," she answered softly. "I hadn't meant to ever speak of that. It all belongs to the past, Dave. I know you've forgotten . . . about you and me . . . so long ago. I've hoped that you'd forgiven, too."

"Forgiven?" he asked hoarsely.

"Forgiven me for marrying Jack Winston," she said. "I had to do it because my people needed money—and he had it. If you'd stayed in the Lodgegrass you would have found that out. I couldn't tell you . . . because I loved you, and I was afraid you'd talk me into forgetting what I owed my folks. That's why I named Jack's son after you—to repay. Buck doesn't know anything about it, Dave, but I tried to pattern him after you, too. Don't you see? That's why I want him to take his medicine when the syndicate man comes—just like you would."

Big Dave Silver stood rooted to the floor, her words singing into him like triggered bullets. For the first time he was seeing himself in his true light. There had been two Big Dave Silvers. One of them was King of the Lodgegrass, a grand gent whom everybody respected. The other, the real Dave Silver, was a low sneaking snake, a pride-blinded man who had packed a grudge against a woman.

He realized dimly that his fingers were hurting her. He released her, groped for his sombrero.

"Wait for me, Mary," he said dully. "When I come back we'll start talking where we left off."

WORDS tumbled from her as he streaked through the doorway, but his own thudding boots drowned them in his race to the horse corral. Slapping gear on his mount, he vaulted to the saddle and headed southwest—to the Bottleneck Pass, where Sig Roud and his men would be riding. He was going to turn them back!

The moon was more than an hour high when he gained the shadows of Bottleneck Pass. Leaving his horse, he clambered high among the rocks that walled the defile, sought a vantage point. There he crouched, a shadow among shadows, and waited. The wait was not long. First came the distant measured beat of horses' hoofs, many of them. It grew louder and louder. And then Sig Roud and a score of men filed into view.

Big Dave arose, a moon-painted statue. He held his hand aloft.

"Turn back," he called. "The deal's off."

But even as he said it, he knew what Roud's reply would be. The rustler chief edged forward, leaned across his saddle.

"Silver," he grated, "what the hell kind of a game is this? Do yuh think I've come all the way down from the hills on a wild-goose chase? Yuh made the deal. Yuh sent for me tuh raid the Double O—and that's what I aim tuh do!"

"I'm not here to argue," Big Dave said icily. "Turn back—or fill your hand!"

And Sig Roud filled his hand. Death spurted toward Big Dave, a vicious orange streak. The cattleman answered in kind. Flinging himself behind a rock, he poured lead into the packed men below. For an instant their confusion was to his advantage, but the rustlers were old at this game. Like scattering leaves they spread, sought the cover of rocks. Bottle-

neck Pass became a roaring, echoing hell.

Big Dave was hopelessly outnumbered. There was no chance that anyone would hear the shots, come to his aid.

His men would find his bullet-riddled body on their return from town late that night. They'd take him into Lodgegrass for a grand funeral that everyone would attend. People would say that Big Dave had tackled a rustling crew single-handed and died fighting. But Big Dave had no regrets. Before that happened, he'd be doing the one thing in his mis-spent life to make himself worthy of the things people would say about him.

A bullet raked his shoulder. Turning, he saw men silhouetted above him on the ravine's rim. He fired at them, heard a man scream and fall. But with rustlers above as well as below, the rocks no longer provided any shelter, so Big Dave tried to stand erect.

It percolated into his fogged brain that the odds were growing greater instead of less. Shaking the mist from his eyes, he studied the moon-washed men scurrying below. Then Big Dave sagged wearily among the rocks, his guns idle. It was impossible—but his own men were down there, battling the rustlers! And above the roar, he heard the bawling of gun-frightened whitefaces. It didn't make sense to Big Dave. . . . Swirling darkness enveloped him.

WHEN consciousness came again to Big Dave he was in his own bed at the ranch-house. His range boss was in the room, helping a fussy little man who smelled of medicine. It took a full minute for Big Dave to piece things together, and even then he couldn't grasp the miracle that had saved him. But the foreman was talking to the doctor and his words brought understanding to Big Dave.

". . . Yep, Mrs. Winston run smack into us when she was riding over to call on the boss," he said. "She told us to turn the cattle back, then rode on. Lucky for the boss we walked them critters slow, 'cause we hit the south range again just about the time hell was a-poppin' in Bottleneck. We cleaned up on Roud and his bunch to the last man, but Big Dave had done about half that chore before we came."

So Mary Winston had turned his men toward home! Mary Winston had done that because she didn't want Buck to fool the syndicate man. That was the bitterest pill of all. Big Dave had been saved from his own trap because Mary had wanted her son to be like him!

Then suddenly he felt a cool hand against his forehead, saw Mary Winston smiling down upon him.

"When you left I tried to tell you that I'd met your boys," she said, "but you wouldn't wait to listen. You always rode away too fast, Dave."

Big Dave sighed, closed his eyes. She thought he had gone after the cattle. She didn't know about his bargain with Roud. Nobody did. Maybe some day he'd tell her the truth—some day later when he'd become the sort of gent folks thought he was. He was going to start to really live, Big Dave decided.

He'd make up for those wasted years, Big Dave knew. For the eyes of Mary Winston had held a strengthening promise as she smiled upon him. It was nice to think that soon there might be a Queen of the Lodgegrass Country—a grand lady who would help Big Dave Silver learn how to live in the years that were yet to come. . . .

Stories by Ace-High's writers also appear regularly in Popular Publication's other westerns — Dime Western, Star Western, Ten Story Western, Big Book Western, Western Raider, .44 Western and Rangeland Romances!

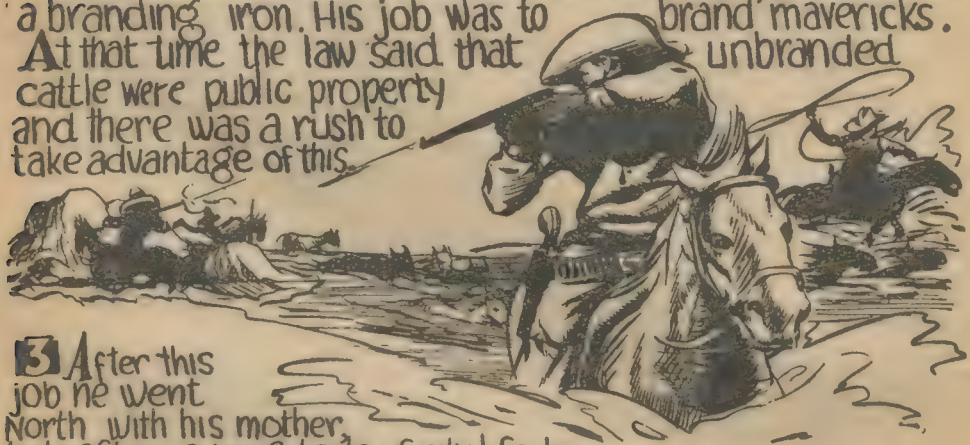
CHAS. SIRINGO

COWBOY DETECTIVE

Whenever and wherever old timers get together and swap yarns about the Old West the name of Charles Siringo is bound to crop up. Siringo knew every one of importance in the Old West and in 1919 wrote an eye-witness account of the Wild West as he knew it.

Born Feb, 1855, in Matagora, Texas, he got his first book larnin' from a Yankee school-master who suddenly left for the North to fight with the Union armies.

2 At the age of 11, he hired out to run cattle for $10. *a month*. Here he learned to ride, rope, and handle a branding iron. His job was to brand mavericks. At that time the law said that unbranded cattle were public property and there was a rush to take advantage of this.



3 After this job he went North with his mother, but after a brief taste of city life he made tracks back West, this time he rode the Rio Grande, rounding up wet ponies and mossy-horn cattle. These were mostly wild timber cattle which only graze on the edges of the prairies at night, hiding in timber during the day. They actually had a fine moss on their horns.

WHO MADE HISTORY

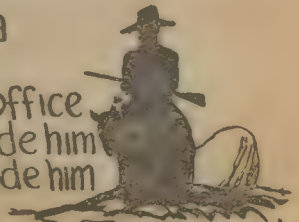
4 Siringo began to travel in fast company. He broke ponies at $2.50 a head and made money. For a time he was hopelessly in love with a beautiful half-breed upin Paul valley. Only his fear of becoming a "Squaw - man" kept him from marrying her

5 The long arduous cattle drives left the cowhands with time and money to spend. Once after a long drive, Charlie and a pal, Wess Adams, rode into Dodge city to 'relax'. In the "Lone Star Dance Hall," run by Bat Masterson, they got into a fight with the long-haired buffalo hunters. They got out of town alive, but not until Adams was stabbed in the back.

6 The next few years found Siringo working for "outlaw" Bill Moore. For no good reason at all, he rode down the Chisholm trail 1100 miles.

About the 1st of September when his steers were turned loose on the winter range, he received a letter from his boss telling him to take three of his best fighting men and join Pat Garrett's posse to look for Billy the Kid (*Garrett later killed Billy*)

7 In the spring of 1886 he applied for a position with the Pinkerton Detective Agency. They sent him to their Branch office in Colorado, where his good work made him famous. In 1916 Gov. Wm. C. McDonald made him a Ranger with a commisson on the Cattle Sanitary Board. Today he lives in retirement on his ranch.



A woman's pleading eyes told Sheriff Roy Zand that the man he was marching to the gallows was innocent—and they sent him out, a fugitive running before his own posse, to die for an unwritten statute that is older than mankind!

"You are staying in there, Zand!" Belloway roared. "All of you!"

LAWMAN BEYOND THE LAW

By EUGENE R. DUTCHER

SHERIFF Roy Zand stood beside his desk, his knuckles drumming the top with measured, rhythmic beats. Somehow the monotonous tapping sound helped him hold his raw nerves in check. Anne Henderson sat rigid on the very edge of her chair, pale, her lips trembling.

Both stared down the gloomy corridor of steel bars and cement to where a little old lady stood before a cell. A black lace shawl partially concealed her gray hair and tired shoulders. Mary Furman was saying goodbye to her husband.

Slowly Anne Henderson loooked up at Roy Zand. "You—you can't do it, Roy," she whispered. "You can't hang Harry Furman."

Hard little muscles quivered in Zand's jowls, but he said nothing. Outside the dusty street was quiet. Always a hush lay over Fernville at twilight, when the

sun had gone and darkness had not quite arrived.

"You can't, Roy," Anne repeated, a little desperately. She was standing before him now. "Harry Furman is innocent. He did not kill Wyn Foller. Somehow Don Belloway framed him, and deep in your heart you feel that is true."

Zand's eyes looked gravely down into hers. "You're only guessing, Anne," he said slowly, "just like me. An honest judge and jury heard the evidence and convicted Harry of murder. If I don't hang him at dawn tomorrow someone else will. Don't you see there's nothing I can do?"

Suddenly Anne was very close to him. "But there is something you can do." A pulse in her throat echoed the wild beating of her heart. "You can let Harry Furman escape. With your help he might reach Mexico."

Zand felt sweat rush out in cold little beads. He had half expected this was coming. "You know what that would mean?" he asked quietly. "I'd be outlawed, hunted the rest of my life. What of us, Anne? Of our plans? I've about got the ranch paid for. Another year—"

"I know." Anne tried to steady her voice. "But could either of us ever be happy feeling you had hanged an innocent man? Could we, Roy?"

Only the deep tan kept the gray from showing over Roy Zand's high cheekbones. "And if Furman really is guilty," he muttered, "and I help him escape, that will be just as bad."

Outside Fernville went callously about its business, as if totally unmoved by the fact that an old man was to die at dawn. Merchants passed the windows, hurrying home to wives. Crazy Lou Norton wandered by, his red-bearded face turning aimlessly from side to side. Wide eyes questioning, lips grinning, he was a harmless twenty-three-year old child.

Two men left the White Horse Saloon across the street and came stalking toward the jail. Zand recognized Don Belloway and his foreman, Hank Tulley, Furman's accussers. He read trouble in the stiff swing of their shoulders.

"You had better go now, Anne," he suggested. "Those two didn't like some of the things I said at the trial, and they've been drinking."

Anne made no move. Both young folks watched Belloway striding forward, his jaw set hard, the way it had been two weeks ago when he and Hank Tully had brought old Harry Furman in at gun point, claiming they had seen him shoot Wyn Foller. In court it had been the word of Don Belloway, a substantial cattleman, against the word of Harry Furman, a poor homesteader. Furman had claimed he rode into Foller's yard and someone had clubbed him over the head; that he remembered nothing after that until they brought him to town.

But everyone knew Furman and Foller had had bitter arguments over a waterhole that lay between their two homesteads. And no one could even imagine Don Belloway, who was a cattle baron and a town councilman, murdering Foller for his poor homestead. Not even Zand could justifiy that, but at night the eyes of Harry Furman haunted him; they seemed honest, bewildered eyes.

DON BELLOWAY entered the office with an arrogant stride. His long fingers barely tapped the brim of his black Stetson at sight of Anne, then his strange, pale eyes drove at Zand.

"You did a lot of talking at the trail." Each word snapped as if his teeth were clicking together. "I'm hankering to know what you meant by saying if they postponed the trial you could maybe prove Furman innocent. That was the same as calling me and Hank liars."

"Yea," echoed Hank Tully, a bowlegged, ratty little man who showed his

liquor in red squinty eyes. "But you ain't going to call me a liar again, are you, fella?" His voice was whiskey raw, like the angry buzzing of a rattler.

Zand seemed at ease. But thoughts, like striking lightning, lashed through his mind. There was something about the murder of Foller that he had told no one, not even Anne. For two weeks Zand had waited, hoping to prove Harry Furman innocent. It was too late for that now, but he might still convince himself beyond doubt.

"No, Tully," Zand said, "I'm not calling you or Belloway a liar, but somebody did lie."

It seemed a casual move that carried Zand away from Anne. He watched Belloway, whose pale eyes were narrowing. Those eyes contrasted strangely with his dark, thin face and black hair.

"You remember," Zand went on, "it rained till eight that night, and Foller was killed at eight-thirty. I was the first one out there, and I found tracks in the mud that didn't belong to either of you two, and they weren't Foller's or Furman's."

For a moment the only sound was Anne's quick breathing. Zand's knees pressed the desk's side, his fingers resting lightly on its edge. Don Belloway swayed a little forward, his eyes thoughtful. He was cold sober now.

Tully, as slow in thought as he was in gun action, looked puzzled. "What you mean?" he grunted. "Huh?"

"I mean—" and Zand seemed to grow tall as muscles took hold of bone—"a fifth person was at Foller's place that night. He stood for quite a spell at the side of the barn. Then something scared him and he ran away. You know why he ran? That man saw Foller murdered, and he knows who did it!"

Keenly Zand watched for the effect of his words on the faces before him. Belloway, a good poker player, showed no change, but Tully's lips grew a bit loose. His eyes widened with a hint of fear in their depths. He had not the steel nerves of his boss. Tully's knotty little fingers squirmed eagerly over gunbutts, then hovered there motionless as panic crept through him. And Zand, watching so closely, knew Harry Furman was innocent. Before him right now, he knew, stood the murderers of Foller.

Perhaps only the steady fingers of Belloway on Tully's shoulder kept the little man from snatching out his gun.

"I guess we'd better go, Hank." Belloway was casual. He actually smiled a little. "The first thing we know the sheriff will be framing us with this killing." At the door he turned. There was no smile now. "When you hang Harry Furman at dawn," he snapped, "it closes this case for good, and you'd better get that through your head, Sheriff."

Zand watched them stalk across the street toward the White Horse Saloon. He felt Anne's fingers cold on his arm.

"Th—they did it," she whispered. "It was written in Tully's mean little face."

"Yes," Zand agreed, "but I can't prove it. There is no evidence a jury would accept. And if this fellow who saw the murder was going to tell his story, he would have come forward at the trial. I did my best to find him, but all I had to work on was a track that showed a hole in the left boot. I figure he was a stranger just riding through."

Nervously Anne tossed the dark curls back from her shoulders. "Why would Belloway do such a thing?" she asked. "There must have been a powerful reason."

Both were thinking of the Furman and Foller homesteads nestled side by side against the foot of the mountains, two-thirds rock and useless sage.

Anne's voice was husky with despair. "There must be something we can do," she said. "Something, Roy."

"There is," Roy Zand answered sol-

emnly. "Harry Furman and I will be heading toward Mexico. We'll need the night hours badly. They'll come fast after us."

But still they stood there looking into each other's young eyes, feeling their dreams shattering about them like breaking glass. And it had been such a wonderful dream.

Anne would have been able to give up her job in the Royal Cafe. She would have had a little kitchen all her own. Why, they had even picked out fluffy white curtains in the mail order catalogue for the living room.

"I'll be praying for you, Roy," Anne murmured. "Night and day I'll be praying."

Swiftly she turned from him to the corridor. A moment later Anne left, with her arm about Mary Furman's trembling shoulders. She did not look again at Zand.

OUT in the growing shadows at the back of the jail, Crazy Lou Norton heard the hollow beat of the sheriff's boots as Zand strode down the corridor to Furman's cell. Crazy was playing with an empty whiskey flask, filling it with sand, then pouring it out. It was the tenseness of the sheriff's voice that made Crazy cock his wild red head up toward the barred window.

Zand was saying, "I'm taking you out of here, Harry. We're making a break for Mexico."

Harry Furman's hands gripped the bars. Long snowy hair hung about his frail shoulders.

"You mean that, lad?" he choked, lines working in his hollow cheeks. "You wouldn't fool an old man?" But Furman saw the answer in those steady gray eyes. "Heaven bless you, son," he whispered. "And you're doing no wrong, I swear it. But wait! What of you and Anne?"

"Anne and I have talked it over," Zand answered, snapping open the case of his gold watch. "She wants it this way, and so do I. I'll get the horses saddled, Harry. If we can get through the pass before the town is aroused we'll have a chance."

Outside Crazy scrambled erect and loped toward the street, the gaunt frame of him jerking with excitement. As Zand entered the barn behind the jail Crazy reached the dusty thoroughfare. His mouth was opening to scream out the urgent news, when his wandering eyes caught sight of a big black beetle moving slowly through the dust of the street. It distracted Crazy's thoughts. Abruptly he forgot his mission, and dropped to hands and knees.

"You there, little old bug," he murmured, "some big old horse is liable to come along and squash you flat. That's right, crawl up on Crazy Lou's hand."

Very carefully Crazy moved to the elevated board walk and placed the beetle under it. Now let's see, he had been about to do something. Shucks, it seemed like he was always trying to remember things. And Crazy strolled aimlessly toward the White Horse Saloon, where Belloway and Tully stood in earnest conversation.

Quickly Zand finished saddling. He re-entered the office. Grimly he stood by the desk, filling empty belt loops with .45's shells from an open box.

Lights were coming on along the street. Laughing groups of cowpunchers were drifting in from valley ranches for a Saturday night spree. Zand saw Belloway and Tully across the street. He paid little attention to Crazy Lou Norton, even when the red head thrust his face close to the dirty window of the White Horse Saloon. The bartender had placed a quart whiskey bottle on the bar, and Crazy was staring at the label, which was in the shape of two big silver stars. The sight of them stirred vague memories. He had

been trying to remember something about stars. The sheriff wore a star! That was it! The sheriff was helping Furman get away!

Zand moved from the desk. He was in the corridor when Crazy's wild scream sent him plunging forward.

"Jailbreak! Jailbreak!" the mad youth screeched. "The sheriff is letting Furman loose. I heard 'em. I know! Jailbreak!"

DESPERATELY Zand jammed the key in the lock and turned it. The heavy door swung wide and Furman rushed out. Guns bared, Zand led the way back down the corridor and into the office. Outside, the street seemed full of in-charging figures. Belloway and Tully came shoulder to shoulder with honest men, and Zand's leveling .45's lifted to blast slugs high through the windows. Through the falling glass, lead came winging back at the two gliding shadowy figures in the dusk-filled room.

"The barn," Zand snapped, shoving Furman through the back door. Again his .45's sprayed slugs over the heads of the men.

The charge split, swerving around either side of the buildings as Zand followed Furman. The old man was already in the saddle when Zand's boot found stirrup. Knee to knee they swept through the barn's rear door, with lead trailing them close.

"Get to your broncs, boys," Belloway's shout rose above the bark of guns. "Them two are making for the pass. Jump, you fools! Do you want that killer to get away?"

Zand rode low along his mount's neck. "We'll have a mile lead on them," he shouted encouragement.

Furman's long white hair blew back in the wind. "I'm scared you're wrong, lad," he answered hollowly. "My mount has caught a slug. He ain't going to last to the pass."

Zand saw it then, an ugly crimson blotch on the animal's gray side. It grew larger as the game horse kept pace with Zand's black, racing across the flat plains. Already behind them the pursuit was breaking from the town and coming fast, vague figures in the near night. Zand looked ahead to the black bulk of the mountains and the little V that was the pass. It seemed far away. The gray started to lag, and Zand was forced to pull his own mount down.

A strange glow took hold of the land as millions of stars reflected their light against the brown plains. It revealed the pursuit spread out at fifty yard intervals, in a mile wide front, taking no chances on letting their quarry cut back through them.

"They're gaining, lad." There was no fear in Furman's voice. "Leave me. Let your mount have his head. There ain't no use us both getting killed."

They were hidden from view in the first fringe of sage on the lower slopes of the mountains when Zand called sharply. "Pull up Harry. We're changing mounts."

Protesting, Harry Furman found himself dragged from the gray's back and boosted aboard the black. "It ain't right," he kept muttering. "It ain't right."

But Zand's hand whacked the beast's sweating rump, sending it plunging forward.

"Wait for me in Val Verde, below the Border," he called and whipped into the gray's saddle.

Deliberately he put the faltering animal straight along the front of that long line of pursuers. He drew and fired.

At once the far end of the line swerved toward the gun flash. Others veered sharply.

Zand could feel the gray going to pieces under him. Now the whole pursuit had wheeled into the buck brush and bull pines, and Harry Furman had a clear run

for the pass and the Border beyond.

The gray was falling. Desperately Zand kicked free of the stirrups. It seemed a mighty hand hurled him hard to the ground, crushing out his breath and leaving him lying there numbly.

Zand fought to rise as the shouts of men came from all sides. Unsteadily he gained wobbling legs. His back pressed the trunk of a bull pine for support. The shouts were nearer—the voice of a mob in full throat.

Zand's hands lifted above his head and closed on a low hanging limb. Slowly he pulled himself up. He crawled higher into the boughs. He froze suddenly as someone burst from the brush.

"Hey, fellas, here's the gray!" It was Tully's excited, whining voice.

MAN after man crashed out of the brush. Zand could see them vaguely through the pine boughs. It seemed his breathing must be heard. Belloway glared about the ring of faces. Crazy Lou Norton sat the bare back of his white mule and giggled foolishly.

Someone said, "It was the sheriff all right. I got a glimpse of him. He must of changed horses with Furman, and led us off so that old devil could reach the pass."

"That's right," Belloway snapped. "And it's mighty bad when the law helps a killer get loose, but Zand can't get away. He's on foot with no grub. A couple of you boys head for the pass and see he don't get out the valley. The rest scatter for the ranches. Get everybody in the saddle. You can tell them the town council will offer five hundred reward for Zand dead, and if the council won't do it I'll make it good out of my own pocket. This sort of rotten business has to stop." Belloway seemed full of righteous anger.

"That's the talk, boss," Tully shouted. "Come on, let's get started, fellas. We'll have this rat out of his hole afore dawn."

Zand listened to the sounds of their going, his fingers biting into the bark. When only the wind moaned in the tall sugar pines, high above on the mountains, Zand dropped to the ground.

Out there in the bowl-shaped valley yellow sparks marked the lights of scattered ranches. The mountains towered high, bank on bank, encircling it all, grim snow-capped barriers even in summer.

But Zand saw only the very small light far to the right. There lay the Furman homestead, at the mountains' very foot. Anne would be there comforting Mrs. Furman. There would be food and a horse, things he must get before the valley became a swarming nest of man-hunters.

Zand started picking his way through the chapparal. Bitterly he cursed the fifth man who had been at the Foller homestead, seen the murder and been too yellow to come forward at the trial. He condemned himself for not having found the reason for the crime. Belloway must have had a strong motive to do murder.

The stars had moved far across the sky before Zand stopped. Directly beneath him lay Foller's homestead, the shack dark, the corral empty. Its owner was buried on Boot Hill. Not far beyond it was Furman's cabin. Zand could make out the small white-washed barn.

Far across the valley many fires burned, and Zand guessed that the posses were gathering for a systematic search.

Carefully he started down toward the yard . . . while high above, on a rock outcropping, two men sat looking at the ranch. Hank Tully kept rubbing his dirty little chin.

"I got a hunch we're wasting our time here," he muttered. "We ought to be over yonder with the boys getting them started on the hunt."

Belloway's strange pale eyes kept sweeping the yard and its vicinity. Sud-

denly he strained forward. Down there a shadow moved from the barn's side across the open toward the house. The door opened. An instant of yellow light silhouetted the tall figure of a man. Swiftly the door closed.

Tully started chuckling. "Got him, boss," he rasped. "We got him."

Belloway said nothing. Already he was starting the descent. . . .

ONLY for an instant did Zand hold Anne close. She pushed back from him.

"You—you couldn't get away," she whispered.

"Not quite," Zand answered quietly. "Crazy tipped our hand, and the whole town was on our heels. But Harry is safe on his way to Mexico."

Sudden tears of relief filled Mary Furman's old eyes. She tried to speak and failed. Zand understood. His own throat felt that way. He turned to Anne.

"I'll need some food," he said. "Enough to last three, four days."

Outside Belloway and Tully glided through the barn's rear door. A horse lifted its head as they passed its stall, then went back to munching oats as the two intruders melted into the shadows at either side of the barn's wide front door to wait their quarry.

And Zand was coming. He swung toward the front door, a half full flour sack over his shoulder. Anne moved at his side. They had spoken little. Somehow it made it easier not to hear each other's voices.

"There's a horse in the barn," Anne said. "I'll help you."

Mary Furman stood by the oilclothed table. She held tightly a little cross fastened about her neck by a thin silver chain. Her lips moved soundlessly. Her eyes were lifted. She was asking aid for this man and girl who had given away their happiness so her husband might live.

Zand was reaching for the latch when the sound of hoofs in the yard jerked him up short. The flour sack swung from his shoulder to the floor. His hand closed on his gunbutt as he darted sideways to peer from a curtained window. Out there Crazy Lou Norton was dropping from the back of his sleepy white mule.

Crazy stood for a moment, scratching his disheveled red hair as if surprised at finding himself here at the Furman's. Then he started toward the door.

"What shall I do?" Anne breathed.

"Do anything to get rid of him," Zand answered. Quickly Anne glided to the door and pulled it open, blocking the entrance with her body.

"What do you want, Lou?" she asked.

Crazy Lou blinked foolishly in the sudden out-shafting light.

"Want? Me? I don't know," he grinned. "Maybe I want to come in and go to sleep. Me and my little old white mule was up on the mountain for something, but I sure enough can't remember why. I'm coming in, huh?" Crazy stepped forward, but Anne blocked his way.

"No, Lou," she said sternly. "You had better go back to town."

Crazy had been standing in the damp earth where the overflow from the watering trough kept Mrs. Furman's tiny flower garden wet. Now as he stepped forward Zand saw the imprint in the wet earth of Crazy's boot, plainly visible in the out-shafting light. The mark of the left boot showed a hole in the sole. It was the same shape and size as the imprint Zand had found near Foller's barn. Crazy had been the fifth man at the Foller place the night of the murder!

"Let him in, Anne," Zand whispered. "Let him in."

For an instant Anne hesitated, but she caught the steel-like tension in Zand's voice, and stepped back.

CRAZY LOU did not wait for an invitation. He came wandering through the opening. Anne quickly closed the door after him, as Zand stepped forward and confronted the youth.

"You, Lou," he snapped, "you saw Foller murdered. Who did it? Quick, man, who shot him?"

Three people waited breathlessly for the answer. Mrs. Furman still clutched the tiny cross. Anne leaned forward, her eyes dark and wide, her lips trembling. Little jaw muscles worked in Zand's jowls.

"Who murdered Foller?" he repeated.

Crazy pulled the lobe of one big ear. "Golly!" he mumbled in surprise. "Has old man Foller been killed?"

The heart went dead inside Zand. Desperately he shook the mad youth. "You saw him murdered, Lou," he rasped. "You stood at the side of the barn. You've got to remember."

But Crazy Lou only cringed back. "You're hurting my shoulder," he whined. "I don't know nothing about nothing."

A little sob broke from Anne. "But you do, Lou," she cried. "Think. Think hard!"

"It hurts to think," Crazy Lou protested. "It hurts up here." He tapped his wild red head.

Anne was close to the breaking point. "It's so horrible," she whispered, "to know the truth is locked inside his poor warped mind and we can't get to it—the truth that would give you back to me, Roy. It's cruel—cruel!"

"Steady, Anne," Roy Zand's lips moved whitely. "Steady, girl."

He knew the posses would be fanning out. He reached for his watch and snapped open the gold cover.

Suddenly Crazy's jaw dropped loosely open. Both his hands lifted to hold his throbbing head. He came springing forward.

"Gold!" he screeched, pointing to the dull, yellow metal of the watch case. "Gold! That's why Belloway and Tully killed Foller—to get the gold. I remember now."

Crazy Lou's wild scream filled the little room and overflowed into the night. It reached the barn and straightened the crouching Tully and Belloway like lashing slugs. Two shadows left the barn, to glide to the side of the house—shadows that carried bared guns, with Belloway in the lead.

Tully nudged his boss. "That crazy bat is putting a rope around our necks," he hissed. "What we waiting for? Let's go get 'em."

But Belloway continued to kneel at the building's side. He was staring at a shiny five-gallon can under a work bench nailed against the house. There was the odor of kerosene, likely spilled when Mrs. Furman had filled the lamp. Slowly Belloway's hand reached out and lifted the can. It was at least half full. The tinder dry shack would go fast, and fire would leave no evidence of murder. Even Belloway's dark forehead grew clammy and cold at the thought of the thing he was about to do—must do. For everyone in that shack knew too much. Carrying the can, and with Tully following him, Belloway slipped quietly to the back of the house.

INSIDE, Zand stood statue-like. He could feel Anne's fingers clutching his arm.

Both faced Crazy Lou Norton.

"Gold?" Zand asked softly, afraid of breaking the mad youth's train of thought. "What gold, Lou?"

"Why, the gold what's in the mountains on the back of Furman's and Foller's homesteads." Crazy Lou hopped up and down with excitement. "I seen an' heard it all a-standing there by Foller's barn, waiting to make sure the rain was

all over. Tully and Belloway ride up and hide behind the hay stack. I could hear 'em talking low-like. It seems Tully has stumbled on a gold vein a while back what runs through Foller's and Furman's homesteads. But when Belloway tries to buy Foller out, the old fella gets suspicious and won't sell. Belloway is scared Foller is going to find the gold too. It seems like they know Foller has asked Furman to come over that night."

Zand continued holding the gold watch that had brought back this flood of memories before the youth's wild eyes, and Crazy rushed on. "Pretty soon old Furman comes riding into Foller's yard, and Tully jumps out and clubs him over the head. Tully grabs Furman's gun. And when Belloway calls Foller out, Tully shoots the poor old fella dead. Gee, I was sure scared. I lit out of there for town, meaning to tell you all about it, sheriff, but somehow I got to counting stars and forgot. Gee, you know there is an awful mess of them little old stars."

For several minutes Zand had been vaguely aware of the odor of raw kerosene. It grew suddenly stronger—too strong to come from the lamp on the table. For an instant Zand stood there, head high, nostrils quivering, sensing danger, while out behind the house a tiny flame crept along a trail of kerosene toward the saturated rear wall.

It came with a roar, like a blast of wind. The flame took sudden hold of the soaked wall and rushed across it in a solid sheet of fire that seemed to shake the frail building. Black smoke squirted in around the door and windows.

Crazy Lou let out a wild yelp and plunged for the front door. He jerked it open even as Zand, realizing the fire had been set, jumped for him. His shoulder hurled Crazy sideways into a corner.

Zand stumbled to a knee. He saw gun flame lash out from the barn on his right. Another flash showed from the watering trough on the left. He heard the whir of lead close to him. Then Zand threw himself sideways.

"You are staying in there, Zand!" Belloway roared. "All of you! It's a rotten business, but you forced my hand. The women know too much. It's my life or theirs."

Zand listened with the heart cold inside him. Flames funneled under the back door and licked up the inside wall. A window crashed under the intense heat. Curtains vanished in a white sheet of flame. Fire ran along rafters, like something alive, with little red teeth eating hungrily.

The tiny room was fast growing unbearably hot. Mary Furman coughed. Anne's arm was tight about her.

"The posse?" Anne asked. "They might come in time?"

But Zand shook his head.

THERE was just one chance to get the women safe through Belloway and Tully's cross-fire. Desperately Zand wheeled to the corner where Crazy Lou lay whimpering. Zand jerked him erect. Snatching Furman's .30-30 carbine from its wall pegs, he thrust it into Crazy's trembling hands.

"You and I," Zand said, "are going out that door together. I'll try for Belloway. You go at Tully, behind the trough on the left. You understand, Lou, you go for Tully and keep shooting. You've got to be a man just this once—you've got to!" It was a prayer more than an order on Zand's white lips.

"You and Mrs. Furman follow us out," he said to Anne. "Run for the mountains and keep going. Ready?"

"Ready," Anne murmured.

Zand squared around to face the door, his big hands gun filled. He could feel Crazy Lou's shoulder trembling against his, but the mad lad had pumped a shell into the rifle chamber and there was a

light in his wondering eyes that might be courage. Behind them Anne and Mary Furman waited silently.

"Now!" Zand snapped.

As his boot struck the sill he started firing. Belloway answered from the barn. Then came the crack of Crazy's rifle and the quick echo of Tully's .45.

Anne and Mary Furman had reached the open. They were running forward between Zand and Crazy, who moved to the right and left, holding open that thin path to safety.

Zand moved steadily forward through the swirling smoke, firing with either hand. Crazy was faltering badly.

Glancing back, Anne saw him stop. A slug from Tully bit at his ear, and sudden panic gripped Crazy. He let out a wild screech, hurled the rifle from him. It went bounding away and vanished in a down-swirling cloud of smoke. Sobbing, Anne turned. She saw Tully rear up from behind the trough. A grotesque figure in the fog-like haze, he groped forward toward Zand's unprotected back.

Then Anne found herself running back. Her trembling hands snatched up Crazy's discarded rifle and she was firing—firing blindly, protecting her man's back as best she could.

Tully faltered under the unexpected attack. His mean little face twisting, his .45's swung toward Anne. Suddenly black smoke descended like a curtain falling on an unfinished play, and through its density the battle raged on.

Zand, unaware of what was happening behind him, crouched low behind his guns as they blasted flatly in the thick air. His right leg wanted to let him drop. Something sticky kept running down his temple. He tried to hold steady on that little dart of gun flame out in all that blackness, because he knew Belloway would be behind it.

Several times after his guns ran dry, Zand pulled trigger before he realized they no longer kicked against his palm. Now only the rushing roar of the flames filled the night. The smoke was lifting. Before the barn Belloway lay as only the dead lie.

Unsteadily Zand turned. He saw Anne still down on a knee, the rifle lying on the ground. She held a hand to her shoulder, where a red stain was spreading. And out there Tully was groaning, his right leg twisted strangely, his left hanging useless.

"Anne!" Zand muttered. "Anne!" . . . He knew he was falling, but he never seemed to strike the ground.

VAGUELY voices came to him. Someone was saying, "How are the girl and Zand now?"

"They're all right," came an answer. "We patched them up and sent for Doc."

Zand knew he was stretched out in the cool meadow grass, with a coat under his head. He was looking about for Anne, when Mrs. Furman's voice broke in softly.

She was standing before a group of men. "My husband," she asked, "he can come back to me now?"

"You bet your life he can!" That was Harlow, who had been on the jury. "We sure made a bad mistake. The boys is talking to Tully now, and he's spilling the whole story. You folks will be rich."

Crazy Lou Norton wandered about among the possemen, proudly displaying his slightly nicked ear.

"Can I fight!" he mumbled. "Boy, can I fight! I'm a darn good runner, too."

But where was Anne? Then Zand became aware of warm fingers in his. He turned his head slightly. Anne lay there, a coat over her shoulders. Neither spoke, but their young lips were smiling. They would be buying those curtains for their own little living room soon now.

THE GAMBLER HELL SENT BACK

CHAPTER ONE

Gambler's Masquerade

THE gambler, Evarts Kintry, saw the stagecoach accident from start to finish. Riding along the short-cut trail in the canyon bottom, a hundred feet below the wagon road, he had a plain view of the stage from the time it started down the mountain side. As soon as he saw the speed the four horses were making, he guessed that the driver must be very drunk.

Then the tongue between the wheelers snapped off on a sharply curving grade. Below was a straight drop of nearly a

Gambler or gunman or black-robed judge —to a Territory hell-town it made little difference who enforced the law. . . . But all three came in one quiet-toned, swift-acting person when Evarts Kintry strode into the Claypool courtroom in a dead man's boots—to gamble with another man's life in a game of twisted justice!

A novelette of twisted hell-town justice

By RAY NAFZIGER

hundred feet. Coolly the gambler watched.

As if possessed by a devil the heavy stagecoach headed straight for the brink of the cliff. Its weight crowded the wheelers against the leaders. The red-faced driver sawed at the horses' mouths and his frightened yells came down to Kintry and echoed from the cliff walls. Then the gambler saw the bay leaders on the very edge of the drop, their front hoofs scrambling desperately against the shove of wheelers and coach.

It lasted but a second or two, that mad dance of frantic horses on the brink. As the vehicle started to topple, Kintry saw a passenger at the door of the coach, wrenching wildly at the door handle. He got the door open and leaped clear. The driver also was trying to fling himself to safety. But he was too late. The falling vehicle carried him with it.

Then Kintry saw horses and stage plunging in slow motion down the cliff. The horses, their bodies looking strangely elongated in the fall, fell first, as if they still pulled the stage after them. The sun reflected fleetingly from their steel shoes.

The outfit glanced off a ledge twenty feet below the trail, then plummeted

The courtroom was in a sudden bedlam. It was impossible for Kintry to watch them all.

straight down for some eighty feet before horses and coach landed with a tremendous crash in a clump of cedars. Dust mushroomed up from the foot of the canyon wall as Kintry spurred toward the spot.

He crossed a creek, splashing the water high. Beyond a slope covered by a hackberry thicket, he came on one of the bay leaders. The animal had been torn from his team-mates and lay kicking feebly, barely alive. The gambler dismounted from his chestnut, took a .44 from a shoulder holster and stopped the brute's suffering. The other three horses lay close to the coach in a motionless tangle of legs and bodies.

Flung clear of the vehicle, the driver lay on a heap of boulders, his neck broken, his head bent at an unnatural angle. Miraculously the sides of the stout coach had not been smashed in. One door had been torn from its hinges, and through the opening projected the legs of a man, the sole passenger left in the coach.

Kintry hauled out the limp body, plainly dead, although there was no trace of blood on him. He was an Easterner; wore a stiff white collar, black tie and the long black coat often adopted by lawyers and politicians. Paunchy of body, bloated of face, the man appeared to be somewhere in his forties. Raven black hair tumbled over a high forehead, almost hiding the open gray eyes.

Kintry stooped to brush the hair back from the high forehead, and as his own gray eyes stared into the open sightless ones, he gave an exclamation. Over Kintry's lean, almost gaunt face, flashed what few men had ever seen there: utter astonishment.

FOR Evarts Kintry, who without change of expression had won and lost thousands of dollars on the turn of a card, had known this dead passenger intimately years before, in a quiet little Eastern city. In fact, the two were cousins, the dead man's last name being Kintry's first—Evarts. As young men, Will Evarts and Evarts Kintry had studied side by side in their uncles' law office, following the tradition of generations of lawyers and judges in the Evarts and Kintry families. In Evarts Kintry, though, a wild streak began to show, and the uncles watched him more closely. Then came the final blowup, and the uncles' solemn conclusion that he was destined to be the black sheep of the flock. Young Kintry, agreeing with them, had jubilantly pitched his law books out of a window and, obeying impulses, had traveled West to become a gambler. In the years since then he had never communicated with his Eastern relatives.

Kintry had seen violent death too often to be shocked by it. Looking down at his cousin now, he began speaking to Will Evarts as if he had just met him on a street.

"Why, how are you, Will?" he asked in a genial drawl. "You remember me, of course—your black-sheep cousin?"

The gambler waited smilingly for an answer, and then nodded his head as if the dead man had replied. "Yes, I'm really Evarts," he went on. "And here you are, the hope of the Kintry-Evarts families, dead. And here am I, the disinherited no-good that everybody predicted would be killed some day while robbing a train. You're a tenderfoot of course, Will, but you really should have know better than to take a shortcut down a cliff.

"How about shaking hands, Will? You're thinking maybe I still hold a grudge for the slick way you put off on me the theft of that hundred dollar fee—the one you stole. I forgave it long ago, Will, for you did me a big favor, yanking me away from those dry-as-dust law books. But what brought you West, Will? Not by any chance to hunt up a black-

sheep cousin and notify him of an inheritance?"

Evarts Kintry stooped. Running his hand into the breast pocket of the dead man, he brought out a huge black leather wallet which served as a billfold and a container for papers and letters. Leisurely Kintry examined these.

"So the President has appointed you a judge here in the Territory?" he remarked. "That's why you came West. And you're on your way to Claypool to conduct a session of court, beginning tomorrow. How sad, Will, just when you were about to join the long line of judges in our families."

Kintry whirled suddenly as a stick crackled behind him, and saw a fattish bareheaded man, sweating and disheveled from a hurried descent from the stage road. In an ornate holster at the man's hip swung a bone-handled six-shooter. The man's pudgy right hand was on the butt; his agate eyes were suspicious.

"YOU probably could make a fast draw with that gun," commented Kintry. "You must be quick—to have jumped out of this stage before it went over—but you're plumb too quick to guess I would rob a dead man. It happens that I know Will Evarts."

The man's hand dropped from the gun and his sharp eyes shifted to the dead man and back to Kintry. "You know Judge Evarts?" he asked, astonished. "But he has just arrived in the West—got off the train yesterday. You knew him back East?"

"We were raised together. Yes, I knew him—so well you'll excuse me for not shedding any tears now."

The fattish newcomer studied Kintry closely, and Kintry idly sized him up in turn. He was, the gambler judged, a lawyer; one of the shyster variety, slick, shrewd, unscrupulous. Frowning a little, looking hard at Kintry, the man was evidently turning something over in his head.

"Do you realize," he said, lowering his voice, "that you and I are the only two people in the Territory that know Judge Evarts is dead?"

Kintry grinned bleakly. "Naturally. Since there's probably no one else within ten miles of us."

"I don't mean that. I mean only you and I know this man is the judge who's to hold court tomorrow in Claypool. I met him at the railroad yesterday and been travelin' with him by coach ever since. Account of shortage of judges here in the Territory, he was ordered to go straight to Claypool instead of reporting at the capital first. Which makes us the only ones that know this corpse belongs to Judge Evarts."

"And I still fail," commented the gambler dryly, "to see anything to get excited about in that fact."

"I do," returned the man. "I don't remember having seen you in the Territory before. Stranger here, aren't you?"

"I've just ridden down from Utah. This is as far south as I've ever been."

The fat man nodded, as if in satisfaction. "I had a hunch," he murmured half to himself. "Yes sir, a hunch. In Claypool it's certain no one knows what Judge Evarts looks like, and the chances are no one there will know who you really are."

"What about it?" asked Kintry, puzzled by the talk, wondering if the accident had unhinged the fellow's mind.

"Look here," said the fat man briskly, "my name is Harte. Belleville Harte. Partner in the law firm of Allenby, Morelock and Harte, the Territory's leading attorneys. I'm telling you, fellow, all this can make the two of us a chunk of money. It wasn't accidental I met Judge Evarts and traveled this far with him. My business was to arrange with him to give the right verdict on a case he was to try tomorrow in Claypool. He agreed to it."

Kintry grinned. "From what I saw of Will as a young fellow I guessed he'd be a judge that could be bought. But what's your hard luck got to do with me?"

Harte glanced about him to make sure there were no listeners. "Am I right in guessing you are a gambler? I don't mean just a gambler with cards—I mean the type that will take a chance if there's money in it? No one in Claypool has to know Judge Evarts was killed. It may sound loco, but you could pass easy for a judge without that fancy embroidered vest you're sportin'. I could coach you up so you could conduct court for one day—be Judge Evarts in Claypool tomorrow, savvy?"

KINTRY stared at him. Then he began to laugh.

"Laugh," said Harte, "but by God we could put it over! You act as judge just long enough to decide a case over some gold mining claims. And there'll be more money in it than you ever raked in in a poker game. I can get you a thousand dollars."

"You don't flatter the size of game I play," said Kintry. He'd just gone through a disastrous session of banking faro in Salt Lake, and had less than ten dollars. But he was not admitting that. "I don't care to brag, but in the game I enter ordinarily a thousand dollars would be small change." He waved at his chestnut. "Kentucky saddler I paid a thousand for. Saddle cost me four hundred. In short, Mister Harte, I'm no piking tinhorn."

"I'll make it three thousand," said Harte instantly.

Kintry shook his head. "Not a big enough raise, considering the chance for a long penitentiary sentence. If I kill someone, I can plead self-defense; but I'd find it hard to make a self-defense plea stick in passing myself off for a dead judge."

"Three thousand before you enter court," said Harte. "And two thousand when you leave it with that case decided in our favor. That's final. Not one cent more."

"Five thousand for a day's work is not bad," admitted Kintry.

He looked down again at his cousin. Kintry liked a joke. And this would be a joke on Will Evarts, who had put off a theft on Kintry long before, leading to Kintry's uncles disinheriting him. It would be a joke also on the many Kintrys and Evarts who had served as judges—for their black-sheep descendant to be, if for only a day, a judge. And—he could use five thousand dollars.

"I'll take you up, Harte," he said in the quick manner in which he made decisions. "It will be dark before we can reach Claypool. We'd better hurry. Help me take off the judge's coat. We'll put my flowered vest on him. I'll leave my papers in exchange for his. It would not be at all to my disadvantage if a gambler known as Kintry were reported dead. You and I can make shift somehow to ride my horse. In Claypool you'll say that the horse is yours; that I escaped the coach accident and you happened to ride by and pick me up."

"You're a cool one," said Harte admiringly. "And a smart one. You know all the tricks, eh? I wouldn't want to sit across a card table from you."

"No more than I would care to have you as attorney in a case against me," returned Kintry. "Do you usually buy the jury as well as the judge?"

CHAPTER TWO

A Threat and a Bribe

WITH papers on him to show that he was Judge Evarts, and with the judge's portfolio tied to the saddle, Kintry stepped up on his spirited chestnut. It was only after much maneuvering that

the lawyer managed to mount behind him.

"The case my firm is interested in," said Harte as the chestnut stepped along beneath his double burden, "is over some gold mining properties. For fifteen years a couple of old prospectors, Adam Rickard and Abe Box, worked on some claims on Red Branch Creek, until last year they struck the real thing. Our client, Lon Plimpton of the Plimpton Mining Company, claims ownership of their mines by virtue of an old land grant deed. The whole question is whether our deed is genuine or a forgery."

"I presume that it's a forgery," remarked Kintry.

"If it were a forgery, the firm of Allenby, Morelock and Harte would not be serving as Plimpton's attorneys," said the lawyer pompously.

"No?" drawled Kintry. "What you have told me about the practise of law in this territory makes me glad I took up the honest career of gambler. You lawyers believe in having all four aces up your sleeves before you try a case."

"There's tricks to all trades," said Harte. "As the docket stands, our mining case will be called tomorrow, right after the trial of a Mexican rancher for murder. If he's found guilty and hanged, a saloonman, Sime Hunter, and Sheriff Ira Bleese will add a lot of cattle and range to the ranch they own in partnership. Which makes the Mexican as good as hanged, since Bleese and Hunter and their gang run Claypool. A strong pair, those two, so strong our client, Plimpton, had to give them a lot of stock in his mining company. Plain blackmail, but nobody dares go against Bleese and Hunter."

Kintry could imagine the sort of place Claypool must be—run by two ruffians who could rule a law court even to the point of getting a man hanged. That, however, was none of his business. By tomorrow night he would have at least five thousand dollars—unless Harte double-crossed him . . . . The lawyer was to be trusted no more than a rattlesnake.

It was two hours past dark before they saw the lights of the town of Claypool, and another hour before they rode along the short straggling business street, to pull up at a big low-roofed log stable, which served also as stage station. A group of men stood before it, waiting for the belated coach. Harte told them of the accident, adding the information that he had picked up Judge Evarts, who had escaped death in the disaster.

"Aye. The dom whiskey-soaked fool," boomed the stable owner, a giant Scotchman named McCullough, speaking of the stage driver. "I knew he would drop a coach over a cliff some day. And now we got to ride oot and bury him. It's glad I am thot ye jumped in time, Judge. Will there be any other dead to fetch back, outside of thot dom driver?"

"Just a tinhorn gambler, McCullough," said Harte. "Name of Kintry, from the papers on him. What do you think of my horse?"

"And since when have ye taken to carrying y'r soft carcass aboot on a horse?" asked the livery man curiously.

"Since taking him and the saddles in on a debt," lied the lawyer glibly. "Come along, Judge Evarts. We'll refresh ourselves and see about some supper. Have my horse looked after, will you, McCullough?"

KINTRY accompanied Harte into Claypool's only hotel, where Harte ordered rooms for the judge and himself. Half a dozen men in semi-range, semi-town garb were sitting about a poker game in the lobby. They came forward, and Harte introduced them as members of the territorial bar. A shyster lot, for the most part, Kintry classified them, but genial enough in their welcome to the new judge.

It was late, but the hotel man got up

a meal for them, and the two ate in the deserted dining room.

"Now I'd better get down to instructing you on how to act in the courtroom tomorrow," said Harte as they finished their meal. "Of course I'll wise up my partners, Allenby and Morelock, so they'll help you. With what I can tell you about a law court, you can bluff through for a—"

"I think first," interrupted Kintry, "we ought to see if our chestnut horse has been fed right. He's got as much right to a good supper and bed as we have."

The big stable they found deserted. The giant livery man, McCullough, had left with a party for the scene of the stage accident, and his night man was in a saloon. After some difficulty they located Kintry's chestnut at the rear of a maze of sheds and corrals, in a box stall almost lost among high piles of baled hay. Kintry held up the lantern and looked about him.

His purpose for bringing Harte here had not been solely concerned with the horse. This was as good a time as any for what the gambler had been planning. Slipping out the six-shooter he carried in his shoulder holster, he brought it expertly against Harte's head. The lawyer's knees came unhinged and he went down without even a grunt, out cold.

Stepping to his saddle, which hung on a peg outside his horse's stall, Kintry cut off two of the long rawhide strings. He used one to bind Harte's hands behind his back, and the other to fasten his ankles. Then the gambler took a big silk handkerchief from a saddle pocket and made a gag, knotting it in the middle several times and thrusting the knotted portion into Harte's mouth.

Finally he boosted the lawyer to the top of the piled hay. In a far corner he made a nest, deep enough so Harte could not roll out when he recovered consciousness. A man hidden here could go undiscovered for a week, he decided.

"From what I've learned about lawyers in this Territory," said Evarts Kintry softly, "if there's going to be any stacking of the deck, I want to do it myself."

After looking after his horse, Kintry returned to the hotel. Waving a goodnight at the lawyers engrossed in their poker game in the lobby, he returned to his room.

HE HAD been there but a few minutes before a heavy knock sounded on the door, and there entered a bristle-faced, powerful brute of a man who looked like a gorilla dressed as a human. The visitor's eyes, under heavy brows, were mismatched. A hideous scar ran below the stubble of his face and slashed across the jawbone almost to the jugular vein. Even without the paired Colts at his hips, the visitor, with his thick chest and heavy shoulders, represented a deadly threat. Yet there was a cunning light in his eyes, a foxiness about him that showed more than a brute mind. His bulk brought a loud creak from a chair.

"Judge," said the man raspingly, "my name is Bleese—Ira Bleese, sheriff of Claypool County. I don't bother to wear no star. Ever'body knows who I am. I come to slip you some advice on a case you're tryin' tomorrer."

Kintry eyed Sheriff Ira Bleese coolly and shook his head. "Legal ethics demand that you save your advice for the courtroom," he remarked.

"Legal ethics be damned," growled Bleese. "It'll be healthy for yuh, Judge, to take my advice wherever I give it. We're trying a tough old Mex for murder. He shot and killed in Sime Hunter's saloon, in cold blood, one o' Sime's men. I'm keepin' the Greaser under heavy guard to prevent a lynchin', but if this town thought yuh wouldn't give him a rope sentence, they'd tear that jail apart and hang him. An' if you was to turn him loose tomorrow, you'll likely be lynched alongside him."

Kintry was shocked at the sheriff's impudence. "You presume to give orders to a judge appointed by the President of the United States?" he asked sternly. "To actually threaten me?"

"I don't care who appointed yuh," snapped Bleese. "The President don't run Claypool. Me and Sime Hunter does that, savvy? Damn right I'm handin' you a threat. This Greaser rancher is guilty as hell, and when this town goes on a rampage in case he ain't convicted, I won't be able to protect yuh. I won't even try," he leered. "Yuh just better remember that."

"I'll remember it," said Kintry indifferently. "What happens to a Mexican is nothing to me, but I'm more interested in another case tomorrow. I understand you hold stock in the Plimpton Mining Company, and Mr. Plimpton might be interested to know that Mr. Harte this evening offered me a bribe to throw the weight of my office in his favor. I told Mr. Harte that if he were in this vicinity tomorrow morning I would have him arrested. I believe Mr. Harte left town—very suddenly."

Bleese stared. "Yuh mean yuh ain't goin' to see it the right way on that case ag'in them old prospectors?"

Kintry said sternly, "Do you think I look like a judge who could be bribed?" He winked a Bleese. "Not, at least," he drawled, "for the paltry thousand dollars Harte offered me."

"Why, that double-crossin' skunk of a lawyer!" burst out Bleese. "I know Plimpton authorized him to offer yuh a sight more. The hog was aimin' to grab the rest for hisself. I'll see about that." He lumbered to his feet. "But don't yuh forgit about that Mexican. Or else—" A big finger crossed his scarred hairy throat in an ominous gesture.

After Sheriff Ira Bleese had gone, Kintry unstrapped his cousin's big cowhide portfolio. Inside he found a file of business letters, two law books and several packets of letters addressed in feminine hands.

"Still a lady-chaser, were you, Will?" Kintry commented.

There was a big cuspidor in the corner, and he burned the letters in it. Then he flung the law books under the bed. From his saddlebags he took a pair of long-barreled six-shooters with ebon-black stocks. Carefully he put them in the empty portfolio, wedging them with paper so that their handles would be ready to grasp when the portfolio lay on its side.

Then he sat down to wait for the next visitor or visitors, thinking meanwhile back to the days when he and Will Evarts had studied law together. Kintry, hating law, had dreamed of the excitement of gold camps and cowtowns. He had found his excitement; had even killed men in quarrels. But he had always been an honest gambler. To him, gambling was as honorable a profession as the legal career had been to his relatives. It tickled him now that he who had always been an honest gambler should profit now through dishonesty in a court of law, where for generations the names of Kintry and Evarts had been honored.

Then a knock sounded on the door. He called an invitation to enter, staying in his chair, with the six-shooters in the portfolio convenient to his reach. He had heard no disturbance to indicate that Harte had been found, but that was a risk he had to run.

THE man who entered was of an entirely different type than Sheriff Ira Bleese. He was a lean-bodied, cat-footed sort, with restless eyes and a shrewd face. From his eyes and his face, Kintry guessed that his one concern in life was money-making.

"Plimpton is the name, Judge Evarts," the visitor said, holding out a hand that seemed scaly dry to Kintry's touch.

"The Plimpton of the Plimpton Mining Company that is claiming the gold mines on Red Branch? asked Kintry. "I was rather expecting a visit from you. Mr. Harte—"

"A terrible mistake," interrupted Mr. Plimpton, spreading his hands in an apologetic gesture. "I knew that shyster was crooked, but I thought he could be trusted within certain limits. A thousand dollars was what he—uh—offered you?"

"Yes," said Kintry without lying, since that had been Harte's first offer.

Plimpton's bright eyes fastened on Kintry's face. "I hope you will realize, Judge," he said, "that I would never have insulted you with such a small sum. We understand each other?"

"It might be possible for us to," admitted Kintry.

"I ask no more," said Plimpton, with a sigh of relief. "With hundreds of thousands of dollars at stake, the reward for services should correspond, eh? What would you say to ten thousand as a retainer now, and ten thousand more when you leave court tomorrow? Our attorneys have been working on another angle in the case, which will make it easy for you to help us. It is this: Those old prospectors found certain witnesses who could do us a lot of damage by testifying that our land grant deed was a forgery. Fortunately today we were able to persuade those witnesses to leave Claypool. Tomorrow the defendants will ask for a postponement of the case, to give them time to find their witnesses. We ask you merely to refuse it; to order the case to be tried then and there. We are willing to let the jury decide the suit tomorrow. Our case is air-tight."

"Without the missing witnesses?" asked Kintry, smiling.

"Exactly," said Mr. Plimpton, smiling also. He brought out a thick sheaf of bills and laid it on the table. "That's all the cash we happen to have tonight. We will have ten thousand more for you tomorrow evening."

"There couldn't be such a thing as your not trusting me until after the case has been tried?" asked Kintry.

"What!" said Mr. Plimpton, deeply hurt. "How can you think of such a thing? If we can't trust a judge, who can we trust?"

Plimpton patted Kintry's shoulder and, well pleased, padded out of the room. Kintry counted the money and put it into the portfolio between the six-shooters. Easy money—and ten thousand more to come! With that stake he could start his own establishment, a saloon and gambling place. It was time he was settling down. He was getting too old to make the rounds of boom camps.

If he were not getting old, he would never have considered this at all. It was a dirty business. The gambler did not try to deceive himself on that bald fact. He would be helping to rob two prospectors who had worked for years to develop the mines that were to be stolen from them. He thought also of the Mexican rancher in his cell, wondering what would happen to him on the morrow. It would not do to antagonize Sheriff Bleese and Sime Hunter; they were, Kintry realized, capable of having him lynched along with the Mexican.

He put the Mexican and the prospectors, Rickard and Box, out of his mind. What would happen to them was their hard luck. They would have to get themselves out of their troubles. Kintry had himself to think about.

He undressed, and near the door he placed a chair with a water pitcher balanced on its edge. The slightest movement of the door against the chair would send the pitcher crashing to the floor. Then he lay down on the sagging bed, with the portfolio and his guns under his pillow, and slept soundly.

The stakes and danger in this game

were even higher than he had expected, and Evarts Kintry always made a point of sleeping well when he knew that the morrow would bring a game with high stakes—spiced with danger.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Cards for a Gambling Man

AFTER breakfast Kintry went to the livery stable to look to the feeding of his chestnut. Harte still lay where he had been placed. By this time he was probably undergoing a little discomfort, but that could not be helped. As long as Harte lay gagged, Claypool would have no reason to doubt that Kintry the gambler was Judge Evarts; once Harte got loose, Kintry would be at the mercy of Ira Bleese, Hunter, Plimpton and their clan, and would be forced under threat of exposure or violence to do their bidding without pay.

Meanwhile, he found it easy to carry out his role; everyone accepted him without question. He had no need of Harte's coaching, since he had often attended court while studying law in the East and knew the procedure and the phrases of legal machinery. Territorial courts were conducted along simple lines; jurymen had no time to waste while lawyers argued technicalities. Frequently in a murder case the evidence was taken and a verdict reached within an hour.

Kintry, escorted by the lawyers attending the court session, took his place at the desk on the raised platform of the courtroom. The seats were filled, with men standing at the back and flowing out into the corridor. No women were present; justice in the Territory was strictly masculine.

Kintry had never seen a rougher looking crowd. All of the front seats were occupied by gamblers and saloonmen. All of the spectators, ranchers and miners and townsmen, wore guns, not openly, but where they could easily be reached.

Seated, Kintry placed his portfolio in front of him, unbuckling it so that the black handles of his six-shooters were in easy reach. Every minute in this room he would be walking a tight-rope across a chasm, but the gambler soul in him welcomed rather than feared the danger.

The clerk called the first case, that of the Territory versus the Mexican, Pedro Gonzales, who was charged with first degree murder. A jury was swiftly selected; on it was the huge rawboned Scotch livery stable man, McCullough.

The Mexican defendant, Pedro Gonzales, a grayish rancher, illiterate but with a certain dignity, heavily handcuffed and leg-ironed, had been brought in by Sheriff Ira Bleese and two deputies and shoved violently into a chair. Gonzales' attorney, a green young lawyer, meekly asked the sheriff to free the prisoner during the trial. Only after Bleese had prejudiced the jury by loudly arguing the danger of letting so desperate a character loose, did the sheriff unlock the irons.

The prosecuting attorney, a tobacco-chewing ignoramus named Cranery, arose and launched a savage verbal attack on the accused. He would, said Cranery, show that the knife-carrying, cattle-stealing prisoner in a drunken rage had shot without warning and killed a respected citizen of Claypool. Any punishment except hanging was unthinkable.

THREE witnesses gave their testimony. To Kintry's shrewd eyes, all three were thorough-going scoundrels. One, tall and chalky-faced, was Sime Hunter, owner of the saloon in which the killing had been committed and also Bleese's partner in several enterprises. The other two were Hunter's employes, dealers in his gambling games.

The three gave the same evidence: That Gonzales had been losing at poker in a little back room, and suddenly without

warning or cause had shot one of the players, Rod Davis, who had fallen forward to die over the scattered cards on the table. Cranery produced a deck with blood stains on some of the cards, and the witnesses identified the deck as that used in the game.

"Here is the very blood of Rod Davis, killed by a cowardly Greaser while playing a friendly game of poker," ranted the attorney, giving the deck to the jury. After being passed from hand to hand, it was placed on the judge's desk.

Cross-examination by the green young lawyer failed to shake the men's stories. No one had interpreted their testimony to the prisoner. Strained forward in his seat, he was hopelessly trying to understand what was being said against him.

The accused had been the only other man in the room and was his only witness. Now he was called to the stand. But the Mexican who served as his interpreter knew so little English himself that he stammered and stumbled, failing to bring out the sense of the prisoner's testimony. Gonzales swore that Sime Hunter and the other three men had been cheating him. Finally, he said, he had accused them of it.

Rod Davis had then drawn his gun, firing one wild shot before Gonzales had got out his own weapon and killed Davis. He had no proof beyond his own word that the three men had been cheating, nor that Davis had started the fight. Kintry, who knew Spanish well, understood the man's testimony, but the jurymen did not. They did not like Mexicans, anyway. The big Scotch livery owner, McCullough, glowered sternly at the prisoner. The rope and black hood were being slipped inexorably over Pedro Gonzales' head.

Evarts Kintry, sitting with the portfolio containing the first instalment of bribe money and the two six-shooters in front of him, had begun by only half listening to the case. The fate of the old Mexican was nothing to him, and he had nothing to do but decide occasionally on an objection raised by the lawyers to a question. As he ruled one way or another he reflected that his father, several uncles, his grandfather and many other men of his family had so ruled as judges when the fates of similar prisoners were being decided. Never had there been a breath of scandal against any of those judges. It was fortunate that Will Evarts had been killed before he ruined the family's proud record.

From giving only one ear to the testimony, Evarts Kintry had found himself paying more and more attention. As he listened, he became certain that a rank injustice was being done the old Mexican, who had refused to be flimflammed by a tinhorn bunch. Gonzales' only crime was that he had accused them of cheating and had shot one of the crooks in self-defense. Bleese and Sime Hunter were railroading him to a gallows so they could grab his cattle and ranch. Kintry could see it, but the jury couldn't. The matter began to trouble Kintry.

UNCONSCIOUSLY his fingers took up the exhibit of blood-stained cards on his desk. Running them idly through his fingers, with hands made dexterous by years of card playing, he suddenly straightened in his seat. He went over them card by card, examing the back of each one with his fingertips.

The action Kintry took then, as Gonzales descended from the witness stand already as good as hanged, was almost without will on his part. Leaning forward, he called up Sime Hunter and handed him half a dozen of the cards. The courtroom spectators craned their necks in sudden curiosity.

"These are the cards used in the game when Rod Davis was killed?" asked Kintry.

"Yes," said Hunter.

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely sure, Your Honor," said Hunter.

"Run your fingers over the backs of those cards," Kintry instructed. "And tell me if you find any evidence that the cards were marked—by having them pricked with a pin."

"What is the reason for all this folderol?" blustered the prosecutor, Cranery.

"If you will sit down and shut up, Mr. Cranery, you will find out," said Kintry sternly, and suddenly it was not his brain nor voice that was giving the order. It was almost as if someone was standing at his shoulder whispering to him what to say. "Kindly answer my question, Mr. Hunter."

"No, I don't find no marks," Hunter snarled. "Are you hintin' we was crookin' the Greaser?"

Kintry had noticed that one near-sighted old-timer on the jury had used a large reading glass when he had examined the blood stains on the cards. He now called for this reading glass and asked that it be handed to Hunter.

"Now look at those cards," he ordered. "The marking on them was very well done. But if you can't feel the marks maybe this magnifying glass will help you to see them."

"I object to this irregular procedure!" bawled the prosecuting attorney. "Even if the cards are marked, it could have been done after the killin'. And even though

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they were marked, that don't excuse cold-blooded murder."

"Yeah, what's all this got to do with a murder?" growled Sheriff Ira Bleese, getting to his feet.

"Gentlemen," snapped Kintry, "remember this is a law court. Take your seats. Mr. Hunter, do you see any marks on those cards?"

Sime Hunter sullenly claimed he could not, and Kintry had cards and reading glass handed into the jury box. "Maybe the jury is not so blind," he observed coolly.

The markings that had been all but invisible to the naked eye showed up plainly under the reading glass. The jury examined the cards, and one by one each man nodded his head.

The discovery that Hunter and his men had been framing the Mexican with a marked deck brought a queer and instantaneous change in the psychology of the courtroom. The front row of seats, where the ruffian element sat, was in an uproar. Sheriff Ira Bleese was on his feet shouting, gamblers were cursing, yelling for Gonzales' death, trying to scare the jury into a conviction. But the rest of the room, including the jury, was ominously quiet. Men in the Territory hated card sharpers to the same degree they hated Apaches and horse thieves. Even if Gonzales had drawn his gun and shot Davis without mercy, in the eyes of most of those in the room he would have been justified.

Kintry calmed the tumult, and the jury arrived at a verdict without leaving their seats. Every man on the jury at one time or another had lost money in that same back room of Hunter's. The big McCullough, who acted as foreman, announced the verdict.

"Not guilty!" he bawled with a baleful glare at Sime Hunter.

Pedro Gonzales sat paralyzed for a moment, unable to realize his good fortune, and then he rushed up to the judge to thank him.

Kintry cut him short. "You have a fast horse in town?" he murmured in Spanish, speaking too low to be heard by anyone else. "Use him in getting back to your ranch. *Pronto, sabe?*"

CHAPTER FOUR

High-Stake Justice

WITHOUT recess, less than an hour having been used for the murder trial, the case of the Plimpton Mining Company vs. Adam Rickard and Abe Box was called. The attorney for Rickard and Box immediately asked to have the case continued until next term. Witnesses who would have furnished evidence that the land grant deed was a forgery, they explained, had disappeared strangely.

With ten thousand dollars in the portfolio and ten thousand more waiting, Kintry promptly refused the request. He ordered trial to proceed. Thereupon the fox-faced Plimpton and his attorneys, Messrs. Allenby and Morelock, beamed.

Allenby, dignified, pompous, making a rather distinguished appearance with a white mustache and goatee, opened for the plaintiff. Rapidly he sketched the history of the Spanish conquest of the Southwest, dwelling on the old Spanish custom followed by kings of Spain and their royal governors in giving large areas of land to favored men. The document by which Plimpton claimed title was one granting ten square leagues of land to one Captain Benito Nevarez in return for military services against the Apaches and Navajos. This included the Red Branch mine properties of the defendants.

Against Allenby and his fat partner, Morelock, the young frontier lawyer hired by Rickard and Box was a poor match. He could do little more than bring out,

through the testimony of the pathetic work-worn old prospectors themselves, that they had spent fifteen years in developing their claims, suffering incredible hardships, repeatedly fighting off Apaches, laboring against a hundred handicaps. In the end, after years of work, they had found wealth. And now, unscrupulous powerful interests were seeking to take it from them.

Kintry found his heart warming toward the old pair, so resolute and courageous in their search, so helpless before the trickery of these legal rascals.

The oily-tongued Mr. Plimpton was put on the witness stand. He stated under oath that he had found the old land grant deed in the house of a descendant of Captain Nevarez. He told how he had searched old Spanish records until there there was no doubt but that it was a bona-fide deed to the lands which happened—just happened—to contain the Rickard and Box mines.

Without the missing witnesses, the defendants could offer no proof that the deed was a forgery, and the two prospectors drooped visibly. They were beaten hopelessly and knew it. They had no money to appeal the case.

Kintry looked out of a window. To the south he saw the mountain range where the two prospectors had grown old and weary, digging for a fortune that they would not be allowed to enjoy. And again it suddenly seemed to the gambler that he was not alone in presiding over this frontier court, but that other men—his father, his uncles and a grandfather, all the long and honorable line of jurists on both sides of his family—were sitting there with him, hearing the testimony in this case.

KINTRY bent his head to look at the sheaf of bills in the portfolio. He tried to picture the second ten thousand dollars he was to receive. He told himself desperately that he was getting old, that he needed to quit traveling and settle down. He knew too well that a gambler's existence, his next meal and bed even, is uncertain from day to day.

He looked down at the courtroom, at the work-worn prospectors, at Plimpton and his attorneys, and then at Sheriff Bleese and Hunter and the whole crew of ruffians who ruled the town through violence. Kintry had always hated the law, but he had never hated the thing the law represented—justice. Against all men except would-be sharpers, his gambling had been strictly honest. Like many gamblers, he was ruthless at a gambling table and generous to a fault outside.

He knew he could not put himself on the side of the crooks. He was a gambler, but one who had never used a stacked deck. He was too old to begin using one now.

The foxy Lon Plimpton had been brought back to the stand and was about to step down again.

"Just a minute, Mr. Plimpton," said Kintry.

While it was his voice that spoke, someone behind him seemed to be whispering to him the words he should say. Certainly no man in his position would—of his own accord—have said what he did.

"There is just one thing, Mr. Plimpton," he remarked quietly, "that bothers me about this case. Why, if this land grant deed of yours is genuine, did you offer me twenty thousand dollars to help you in your suit? And why did you give me ten thousand dollars in cash last night?"

A bomb exploding in the room could have had no greater effect. Plimpton's mouth gaped open. The lawyers, the jurymen, the spectators sat as if frozen, their eyes fixed on Kintry.

"Certainly you are joking, Judge," stammered Plimpton. "Why should I offer you money? And where did I ever give you ten thousand dollars?"

"Last night in my hotel room," Kintry answered the last question promptly. He slid the sheaf of bills from between the six-shooters in the portfolio, held them up so the whole courtroom could see. "I give this money into the keeping of the clerk of this court," he stated, "to count and hold for Mr. Plimpton, who is its rightful owner."

Plimpton's fat attorney, Morelock, got into action. "Do you mean to intimate," he shouted, as if hoping by noise to overawe the judge, "that my client tried to bribe you?"

"Exactly," said Kintry quietly. "Does Mr. Plimpton deny that this is the money he gave me last night?"

"I never saw it before," declared Plimpton desperately. "Where would I get that much cash? I have been unable even to pay my attorneys. I am a poor man," he finished in a whine.

"I could almost believe you, Mr. Plimpton," purred Kintry, "if there hadn't been three witneses hidden in my room last night, listening to our conversation. Three disinterested witnesses, sir. I have them here in the court. Do you care to hear them?"

The man's face turned pallid. He swung to his attorneys, a desperate appeal in his eyes. But Allenby and Morelock moved away from their client as if afraid he would give them some dread disease. If they were mixed in this bribe-giving, they would be disbarred. Forbidden to practice law, they would never be able again to collect fat fees as the Territory's leading lawyers.

IRA BLEESE, Sime Hunter and their ruffian crowd had listened thunderstruck to the turn in affairs, waiting for the lawyers to do something. When the lawyers refused, Bleese and Hunter, who owned stock in Plimpton's company, began to raise an uproar. But Kintry hammered for order.

The men quieted as the distinguished looking Allenby waved them to silence. "Listen to me, sir!" Allenby thundered at Plimpton. "My firm took your case in good faith. If you tried to bribe a judge, you did so without our knowledge. With three witnesses to that bribery, there's no doubt of your guilt. We resign as your counsel in this case right now. If you have any sense, you will give a quitclaim deed to Rickard and Box, and throw yourself on the mercy of the court."

"Just what I was going to suggest," said Kintry. "If Plimpton will sign a quitclaim deed to the Red Branch properties, I will consider dropping the matter. The clerk of the court will write the deed and take your acknowledgment."

For a long moment Plimpton hesitated. He looked appealingly at Sheriff Ira Bleese, but found no comfort. All this was too deep for Sheriff Bleese; his mind was shrewd but slow in working. Dazedly Plimpton nodded, and the clerk hastily wrote a deed to the lands Plimpton had been battling to take from the prospectors. Plimpton shakily affixed his signature.

Kintry, sizing up the courtroom, knew that the victory was only half won. His clearing of Pedro Gonzales had already set the Bleese-Hunter crowd against him. His interference now in the gold mine case made equally serious trouble certain. They would not let their interest in the gold mines slip without a battle.

The sanctity of a courtroom meant nothing to them. Judge or not, the man who had twice thrown a monkey wrench into their plans was only a man—and bullets would kill him as quickly as any other.

Kintry had been in some tight places, but he knew that this was the tightest of all. In their faces he read the determination not to allow him to leave this room alive. Also he strongly suspected that they did not intend to let the quitclaim deed be recorded.

"The office for recording deeds, I believe," he remarked, "is down the hall. The court will remain in session while Mister Rickard goes out to have the deed made part of the records."

Sheriff Ira Bleese flung to his feet as if raised by powerful springs. "He'll go to hell first," the officer bellowed. "Rickard or nobody else—not even you, damn you, Judge—is going to leave this room before I give the word! There's going to be a new deal in this court—here and now."

CHAPTER FOUR

Judge Colt Holds Court

KINTRY'S hands caressed the stocks of the long-barreled six-shooters in the portfolio before him. The hard cold feel reassured him. A third gun was in his shoulder holster. Yet he was trapped here in this crowded room—he hadn't one chance in a hundred of getting out of it alive.

Kintry had learned one good rule to observe in a fight: start the action first. He got to his feet now. And as he arose, his hands flashed into the portfolio, to streak out with the long-barreled six-shooters. One he trained on the sheriff, the other on the gamblers and saloonmen in the front row seats.

"Mr. Rickard," he said, while the crowd stared bug-eyed, "you will step on down the hall and record that deed. If Sheriff Ira Bleese or any other man tries to stop you, he'll be a dead man."

The old miner, Rickard, hesitated. "Judge," he said, "these men mean business. Best not to stir 'em up. You don't know 'em like I do.'

"I know their kind very well!' snapped Kintry. "You will proceed, Mr. Rickard. Sheriff Bleese, you will sit down."

His gun waved the sheriff to his seat. The officer, taken by surprise, obeyed. Bleese needed time to gather his wits.

In dead silence the old miner took the deed and went down the aisle and out of the door. The gamblers in the front rows sat motionless, looking up at Kintry, who towered above them, watching them hawk-like. Bleese's eyes were snapping fire like an angered stallion's. His big hands clenched and unclenched, but for the moment he had been checkmated.

The giant Scotch jury foreman, McCullough, was leaning forward in his chair, staring goggle-eyed at the man he thought to be Judge Evarts.

"Mon, mon!" he ejaculated. "A two-gun judge!"

Seconds ticked off slowly, too slowly, while Kintry waited for Rickard's return. before the miner had time to reappear, a clatter of running boots sounded in the hall, and through the crowd of men in the doorway someone madly elbowed a passage. It was the fat lawyer, Harte, freed in some way of his bonds and gag, wisps of hay still clinging to his disheveled clothes. He did not wait to see what was happening in the courtroom; his anger was already exploding in words.

"That ain't Judge Evarts holdin' court!" he shouted. "Judge Evarts was killed yesterday in that stagecoach accident! That's a tinhorn gambler who stole Judge Evart's papers. Hang the tinhorn!"

At this moment Harte came in sight of Kintry and the guns he held. The lawyer almost toppled over in astonishment. Whatever further he had to say he kept to himself. But what he had already said was enough to touch off the dynamite.

KINTRY smiled a little at Harte. The court heard the hammers of his hair-triggered Colts click back. This was, the gambler realized, without doubt the end. Maybe he could delay it a little while, but that was all. At best, he could hope to hold them long enough for Rickard to record that deed. And Pedro Gonzales by this time would be traveling back to his ranch.

"Right you are, shyster," he said quietly, while the black muzzles of the guns commanded the room. "I'm a gambler—and a hell of a good shot. Not a tinhorn. But let that go. It won't make any difference. And it's 'Hang the tinhorn,' eh?"

"You're damn right!' yelled Ira Bleese jubilantly. "Its a loop of hardtwist for you, you crook! Coming in here, foolin' us by pretendin' to be the judge! And what you've done today here ain't no more legal than if a cow had set up there."

"Hang the tinhorn!" repeated Kintry, ignoring Bleese. "Yes, I'm deserving that. For I came into this courtroom today to make money. But I changed my mind. I turned back what I had taken last night. I acted as a fair and impartial judge because my people who were judges wouldn't let me dishonor their names. I saw justice done in both cases. But even if I were a tinhorn gambler, I couldn't pollute this law court; a polecat couldn't do that. There's something I want to say to you, but first I'll declare this territorial court adjourned. . . . But wait a minute. Don't rush to get out of here.

"Wait a minute!" he repeated, and Kintry's voice, powerful, deep, quieted the stir in the room. "There's a new court in session." Holding the hammer back so that the gun could not explode, he rapped one of his six-shooter barrels down on the desk three times and raised the gun again. "The honorable and powerful court of Judge Colt is now in session. And Judge Colt is both judge and prosecuting attorney."

Again Kintry rapped a long barrel on the desk top. "The case Judge Colt is hearing is a general charge against Bleese and Cranery and Sime Hunter and the whole damn gang that has made a hellhole of this town. Along with you polecats, Judge Colt puts as defendants these shyster lawyers, Allenby and Morelock and Harte, and clients like Plimpton who would bribe a judge. Judge Colt is speaking, Sheriff Bleese, and if he has to rap for order again, you're going to get a lead slug straight between your ugly eyes."

Kintry's eyes blazed as they shifted from the officer to the men in the courtroom. "Judge Colt ought to place charges against all of you. You're so cowardly you'd sit by and let this crew railroad innocent men to the gallows and steal the fruits of men's hard toil. A court of justice is one place where innocent men should expect clearance and where the guilty should expect penalties for their crimes. If you don't know that, it's time you found it out.

"You think a gambler had no business up here. Maybe you're right. This law court would disgrace the most degenerate tinhorn who ever palmed an ace or sanded a deck. If you want to change it, this is your chance. The defendants, who have made this disgraceful court what it is, are not fit to live with decent people. That is the charge Judge Colt, in his court, makes against your territorial court!" he thundered. "And what have you to say in defense?"

"Nothing we won't say with a rope necktie," shouted the sheriff, as he leaped to his feet. "You got the drop on us, but you can't keep it. Someone in the back, shoot him down."

The courtroom was in a sudden bedlam. Bleese's men in the front rows were shifting position; a gambler at the extreme right was stealthily bringing up a gun. It was impossible for Kintry to watch them all, but still he hoped to hold them until Rickard had recorded the deed.

THEN a new element entered. The big livery stable owner, McCullough, who had been sitting with the gray eyes in his bony gaunt face fixed on Kintry, suddenly arose in his seat in the railed-off space that made the jury box. Stretching out a long arm, he grasped the sheriff's shoulder and shoved him into his chair.

"Sit ye doon, Bleese!" he roared. "Sit ye doon, all of ye! 'Tis no tinhorn that's been speaking to ye—'tis the honorable and impartial Judge Colt. Ye have made strong charges, Judge Colt, but by the eternal, I know ye are right. Still, defendants should always have their chance to reply. Let's hear from them. What say ye, ye fat slug o' a Morelock, and ye Allenby with the tuft o' goat whisker on yer chin? And what say ye, Bleese and Hunter and all o' yer scum?"

He waited for a reply, but got only defiant shouts.

"What, nothing to say for yerselves but foul jeers and insults? Then, the defendants havin' been given their chance to speak, the case is ready for the jury—who are all of ye in this room. . . . The judge here, Judge Colt as he calls himself, has charged us with cowardice. We admit the charge. We have now a chance to redeem ourselves. Let's hear from the jury as to the charges he makes against these scalawags. Storekeepers and ranchers and miners, all of ye who have been afraid to claim yer own souls—what say ye to Judge Colt's charges against these defendants? Guilty or not guilty?"

To Kintry's astonishment a great billowing wave of sound came from the room in one giant voice. "Guilty!"

The Scotchman's voice thundered again. "Aye, guilty! Guilty as hell! Which leaves it only for Judge Colt to deliver sentence. Proceed, Judge Colt. Ye have heard the verdict—assess the penalty."

Kintry stared at the big Scotchman. "The sentence?" he repeated, taken aback by this swift acceptance in earnest of what had been only a ruse to delay action.

"Aye, let us her Judge Colt's sentence," said the Scotchman. "And we will be carrying it oot, never fear, no matter if it be twenty ropes for twenty necks."

"Here it is then," stated Kintry. "It is the judgment of Judge Colt's court that you shall take your sheriff, his deputies and Sime Hunter and all their gang, along with the prosecuting attorney and these other lawyers who have proved corrupt, and escort them to the edge of town. There you shall order them never to show their faces in Claypool again, and warn them that if their faces are seen again in Claypool, up they go under the nearest suitable tree limb. And further, Judge Colt assesses an additional sentence on each man of three kicks to be delivered to a portion of the anatomy best fitted by nature to receive them. The said kicks may serve to impress the sentence of the court forever in the memories of the defendants. That is the sentence of Judge Colt, and you may execute it or not as you choose."

A wild yell erupted from the back of the courtroom, a yell leaving no doubt as to the willingness of the majority to execute the sentence. From the gamblers, the sheriff, the lawyers, came a menacing mutter.

The big McCullough land his hand on the cedar handles of a six-shooter under his coat. "Ye, the accused, have heard the sentence of Judge Colt!" he said sternly. "Have ye any reason why it should not be carried oot?"

MOST of the men at the front of the room became silent, sensing the resolute temper of the courtroom. But the sheriff and Sime Hunter, defiant of the storm that had been stirred up, still hoped to bluff it out.

"We've only this to say to you, McCullough and all of you!" shouted Bleese. "Fold your tails and git the hell out of here so we can settle with this tinhorn."

"So that's all ye have to say?" bawled McCullough. "Men, those of you who are willing to execute the sentence ye have just heard in the honorable court of Judge Colt, git ready yer weepons."

There was a stir among the men at the back, a growling undertone of anger, as

men met neighbors' eyes and nodded imperceptibly. Bleese, who had hoped to run a bluff, saw that it had come to a showdown. And he had the courage to meet it.

Flinging himself to the side suddenly, he went for his gun, drawing it in one flashing motion to turn it toward Kintry.

He had no chance. Kintry had been in too many gun battles. His pair of guns bellowed. The two slugs struck Bleese in the chest, sent him falling over his chair.

Sime Hunter, streaking for his gun and whipping out a hasty shot that splintered the pine desk, was Kintry's next victim. McCullough all but brained another gambler by crashing his gun barrel against the man's head.

The lawyers were holding up their hands, shouting that they were out of the fight. They were not alone. All defiance had melted. Sime Hunter's dealers, cowering together before the bristling array of guns, lifted their hands.

"Hold it! Enough blood has been shed!" thundered McCullough. "Men, execute the sentence of the honorable court. Come down front and take the guns of these scum. Herd them oot into the street."

There was a shuffle of feet as men surrounded the group of lawyers and crooks, disarming them, conducting them into the corridor like so many cattle.

As the procession flowed down the street toward the outskirts of the town, McCullough and Kintry stood at a courtroom window watching them.

"Mon, ye have done a great service for Claypool," said McCullough. "If every court in the Territory could have but one such session, it would be one grand help to justice. Gambler or not, we would admire to have ye stay with us."

But Evarts Kintry shook his head. He knew it had been given to him to play a certain role in the town of Claypool, to bring justice where there had been none before. His work was done.

"There is one thing about which I am curious," stated McCullough. "Ye spoke of three witnesses who was in yer room last night when Plimpton handed over his bribe. Ye did not give their names."

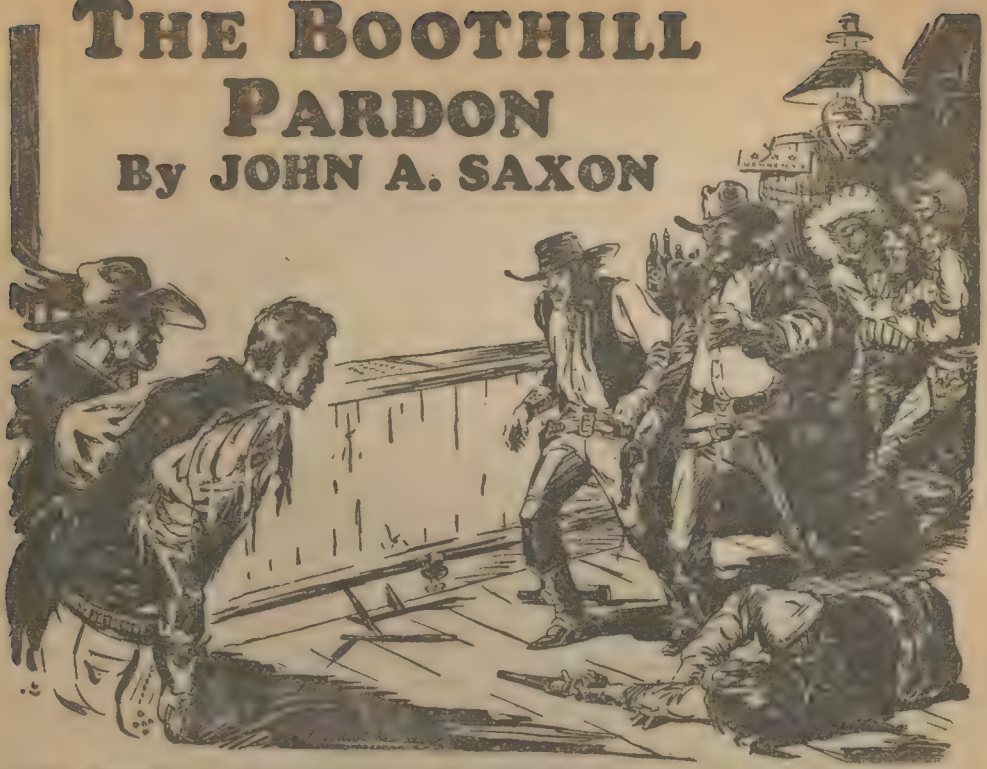
Kintry's bleak face lighted up in a smile. "It was but a tinhorn bluff, McCullough," he admitted. "And yet not exactly all a bluff. Here were my witnesses." He touched the pair of six-shooters he had thrust behind his belt, and then opened his coat to show a third in his shoulder holster.

McCullough's booming laugh arose. "Mon, mon!" he exclaimed. "And what better witnesses could ye ask for a court conducted by the honorable Judge Colt?"

THE END

THE BOOTHILL PARDON

By JOHN A. SAXON



He grinned through bloody lips that were stained crimson from a wound in his cheek.

His past, his notorious fame, even his name were forgotten when "Tommy Smith" rode into Mesa City. One thing he did remember, though: that he hated guns. . . . And only in their death song could he ever hope to win back his shattered manhood!

HE KNEW, as he rode into the range town of Mesa City, that he had been hurt—badly. The world was reeling in front of him, and the clouds of dust from the plodding hoofs of his horse ballooned out in front of him and made things seem more unreal than they were.

Funny, what had happened. He couldn't seem to remember any further back than a few minutes ago. He had no recollection of yesterday. It seemed that he had always been riding. . . .

God, how his head hurt! He put his hand up to his temple, felt the matted hair caked with dried blood. That was queer. He wished he could remember how it had happened. He had been shot, all right—but when, by whom, why?

Then suddenly he realized that he not only didn't remember any further back than now—he didn't even remember his own name!

Dimly, as through a fog, he realized that he had reached the town. There was a man standing on the raised board walk, a man with a star pinned to his shirt. The hombre was pointing straight at him.

What the devil was his own name? He seemed vaguely to remember—Tommy. Tommy what? Where had he come from? Where was he going?

His lean young body was topped by a weather-stained old hat that held curly brown hair close to his head.

He realized that he had begun to slip from the saddle. He felt strong hands catch him before he crumpled into the dust. Then he knew that they were carrying him inside somewhere.

As from a great distance, he heard voices.

"What d'yuh make of it, King Tyler?" some man asked.

"Well, I dunno," was the puzzled response. "As sheriff, I suppose it's my job to find out, but— Just a kid, too. Somebody's laid a nasty crease along his head. This boy's been on the trail a long time. Look at his outfit. He's got a week's stubble on his face. That hat uh his has been used to dip water a hundred times. And that crease on his head—it's still bleedin' some. Better send across the street for Doc Adams."

"Looks like a gunnie to me," cut in another man. "Take a slant at that Colt uh his. See how that holster swings wide, an' look how careful that gun has been kept."

Somehow the word pounded through Tommy's seething brain.

Guns. Guns! The word seemed to throb within him. Always there had been guns—but where, why?

Somebody took the gun from the tied-down holster at his thigh. Subconsciously he moved his hand in that direction.

"Gun-touchy," he heard the man who had been called King Tyler, the sheriff, remark. "Probably been on the gunsmoke prod and expectin' it from every angle. Young, too. Not over twenty-three. Probably be a good-lookin' rannie if he was cleaned up. That slug across his temple nearly finished him. Come on, Ed. We'll take him into my office. Send Doc Adams there when he comes."

TOMMY had a sense of movement, they were carrying him somewhere, he knew. He wondered a little, but it didn't seem to make much difference. Then somebody—he guessed it was the man they had called King Tyler—was wiping his face.

"Get that holster loose, Ed," the sheriff said. "You'll have to cut that thong, it's knotted pretty tight."

Then a long pause, and the sheriff's voice again.

"Mister, *there* is a gun. Made to order, that baby. Look at the gold inlay hammered into the plate. Somebody laid out plenty of dollars for that job."

"What's the monogram, Sheriff?" Ed Bowden asked.

"T.J.W.," was the reply.

Somehow Tommy thought those initials should mean something to him, but they didn't.

"Howdy, Doc," the sheriff said to some man who came in. "Got a job for you."

Tommy felt deft hands moving about his head, fingers that seemed sure of just what they were doing.

"Nasty crease, King," the doctor said. "Close, but I reckon he'll live. Who is he? Got any idea?"

"If he does live—" the sheriff began, and then stopped. He seemed to realize the doctor had asked him a question. "I don't know, Doc. I got an idear or two, mebby—but I ain't sure, an' I dunno how I could *be* sure."

The doc poured antiseptic over the wound, and it stung. Tommy stirred a little.

He'd have to talk with the sheriff as soon as he could. Hell, a man couldn't go on not knowing who he was!

"Take it easy, son," the doc was saying. "You'll be all right. What's your name?"

Tommy had been afraid of that question. He opened his eyes, took in the group standing around him.

"Tommy," he answered, and somehow even his voice didn't seem like one he had ever heard before.

"Tommy what?"

"I don't know."

And that, he realized as he said it, was true.

He saw the sheriff's eyes go into twin slits, wondered if maybe the old lawman knew something that he didn't.

"It wouldn't be 'Tommy the Kid,' would it?" the grizzled old sheriff asked flatly, watching him closely.

Apparently, Tommy thought, that name meant something to the sheriff and to those who were standing around the small room. It didn't mean anything to him, and he said so.

"Take him over to my house an' put him to bed," the sheriff said.

If anyone noticed the authoritative manner in which he said it, nobody paid any attention. They all knew who Tommy the Kid was, the son of a St. Louis business man who had been baptized with the full name of Thomas James Whitney. Berserk with blood lust, Tommy the Kid had killed and killed, and yet no one could accurately describe him. By various reports he was short and tall and light and dark. He had never been apprehended. He was as much a will o' the wisp as mere legend.

SO THEY took him to the sheriff's house on a wide board somebody brought in from the store across the street.

Myra Taylor, the sheriff's daughter, wasn't at all surprised when she saw a group of men coming toward the house with the form of a man on a board. In her nineteen years as the daughter of a western sheriff she had seen it happen before. It had been that way even when her mother was alive. Part of her training had been to handle men who had been hurt.

She asked no questions but led the way to the spare room, pulled down the bed covers and stood for a moment while her father took off Tommy's boots. There was a puzzled look on her young face as she stared at the wounded man.

Tommy wasn't a pretty sight at that moment, but somehow Myra seemed drawn toward his helplessness. Perhaps it was the urge of the maternal instinct, perhaps it was something else.

Once she bent over to straighten out his right hand, which had twisted under him as they laid him on the bed. It may have been a purely reflexive action, but his fingers closed over hers momentarily, held until she disengaged them.

When her father closed and locked the door she seemed to have the answer to the question that had been puzzling her. He handed her the key. That spare room was more than a spare room. It had stout walls and a barred window, a door that was heavy and a lock that was strong.

The single gesture of her father in closing and locking the door had told her what she feared—the wounded man was wanted by the law.

"Don't unlock the door until I come back," Sheriff Tyler whispered. "I'm goin' to the office to write some letters. I just got a hunch—"

The others had gone. Father and daughter were alone.

"Yes, Dad," she said, in a flat tone that might have been taken as a confirmation of her father's instructions or it might have been half a question.

Apparently the sheriff considered it the latter.

"I've just got a hunch," he repeated, "that the gent in yonder room is a pretty important hombre, one 'Tommy the Kid'. That's what I'm writin' the letters about. If there was only some way to identify the devil! Nobody seems to be able to. Some folks even say there ain't no such man."

With that the sheriff went out of the house and back toward his office.

Myra was tall, with hair the color of wheat in the autumn sun; eyes that were as blue as an early spring sky.

For a long moment she stood alone in the front room, watching the disappearing form of King Tyler. Then, for the first time in as long as she could remember, she deliberately disobeyed him. She unlocked the door and went into the room.

Tommy stirred restlessly. He was dirty, unkempt, weary, hurt. But somehow Myra saw past all of those things. What seemed to be puzzling her was how this boy could be the cold-blooded killer, Tommy the Kid.

Tommy opened his eyes, sensing her presence. "Hello," he said weakly, and then closed his eyes again.

"Hello," she answered, then turned and walked out of the room, locking the door behind her.

DAYS stretched into a week—two weeks, and Tommy was physically himself again.

Sheriff Tyler had received no reply to his letters. Being not at all certain concerning his suspicion, he didn't feel that he could hold a man simply because he had a gunshot wound in the head and carried a gun marked with the initials of a killer. He pointed out that those same initials might as well apply to any one of half a dozen men in his own county.

Despite his suspicions, the sheriff found himself liking the boy. His smiling good nature and anxiety to please impressed King Tyler. Toward those with whom he came in contact, he showed a genuine desire to be of service.

But to all questions, however adroitly put, he gave the same answer. He didn't remember who he was. He didn't remember what had happened. He wasn't even sure that his name was Tommy. And he didn't know how he had happened to come to the town of Mesa City. And because his hearers came to realize that Tommy himself believed what he said, they took it as truth.

Doc Adams, questioned in one of his more sober moments by Sheriff Tyler, gave it as his opinion that the bullet crease in Tommy's skull had destroyed his memory.

"It has happened a good many times, Tyler," he told the sheriff. "He may get it back some day—and he may never get it back. He might remember for an hour who he is and where he came from—and then it might pass from his mind and he might never recall it again. The human mind is a wondrous thing."

And then doc took another drink. . . .

During the time Tommy was convalescent the sheriff laid the initialed gun and cut-away holster in Tommy's lap, thinking it might stir some memory. Tommy looked at it, seemed a little puzzled.

"I don't like guns, Sheriff," he said, looking the officer squarely in the eyes. "I—I guess I'm a little afraid of them."

And in his heart, Tommy knew that was true. Somewhere, far in the past, there had been guns. He hated guns. Guns meant death—and he didn't like to consider that. . . .

And King Tyler, priding himself on his ability to read men, believed what he said.

If there were many things Tommy had

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forgotten, there was one he retained full knowledge of, an ability to handle horses and cattle. Once he was able to fork a bronc, he showed the bosses of the surrounding spreads an uncanny ability with a rope and an outstanding cow-savvy.

"He can out-ride and out-rope any man on the Bar 7," said Hank Tuttle to the sheriff one day. "He's got the cold nerve of the devil himself in any emergency—but he just won't touch a gun. Seems to be afraid of 'em. Once when I took a shot at a rattler, his face turned as white as a ghost's."

King Tyler saw with growing concern the attachment that was building up between his daughter and this man who, because he didn't know his own name, had taken the name of Tommy Smith.

Puzzled because Tommy didn't remember the gun he wore, the sheriff had slid the six-shooter in a drawer of the sideboard. Tommy evinced not the slightest interest in the weapon, and but for the occasional care given to the Colt by the sheriff himself, it would have collected dust and corrosion.

In four months Tommy Smith was the Bar 7's top-hand. If there were those who might have had something to say about his advent in the valley, they kept their own counsel. For Tommy Smith, despite his smiling manner, was a demon with his fists. Men who outweighed him by fifteen pounds were quick to call, "Enough!" whether the encounter was in fun or in earnest.

Tommy would gamble a little, but he wouldn't drink. He would fight, but he wouldn't bully—nor permit bullying by anyone else.

He became, in a sense, the puzzle of Warner Valley, and eventually was accepted for what he seemed to be—a good cowhand, a good saddlemate, and a man who minded his own business. In time, even Sheriff Tyler came to discount many of his original suspicions.

On Saturdays, when the rannies from the surrounding spreads rode into town, Tommy Smith was always at the head of the Bar 7 bunch, riding hell for leather into Mesa City. But once in town, his hell raising stopped. He would sit for hours on the front steps of the sheriff's home, discussing plans for the future, never mentioning the past. To Tommy Smith, whatever his past had been, it was dead. A man couldn't think about what he couldn't remember.

"Yuh see, Myra," he used to say, "I'm sort of a maverick. I don't even know my own name. Maybe I never will, but some day. . . ."

And there he would always stop. Myra seemed to sense that the distant "some day" was one that would include her in his plans.

THUS it went on for nearly a year. Sheriff Tyler grew less and less interested in solving the problem of Tom-

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found shelter in the thrilling arms of a blondly handsome cowboy. In the ecstatic paradise of his kisses, life started anew for her, far from the heartbreak of her fugitive past. Yet heartbreak lay ahead, too, for this lovely, foolhardy frontier girl who tried to win love with a lie!

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RANGELAND ROMANCES

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my Smith from a law enforcement angle. Now and then he would thumb through reward notices and "wanted" posters, but no one had ever seen a picture of Tommy the Kid, and the depredations of the renegade seemed to have stopped. . . . So the sheriff kept his own counsel.

And then, one Sunday, Tommy Smith rode in from the Bar 7 for one of Myra's chicken dinners. After the meal the sheriff sat on the front porch, enjoying his after dinner pipe. Myra was washing dishes in the kitchen and Tommy Smith was helping her. Through the window Sheriff Tyler saw something that caused his jaw to drop, his pipe to fall into his lap, unnoticed.

Tommy Smith had been putting silver in the righthand drawer of the sideboard. Inadvertently he had opened the opposite drawer and seen the sixgun he had worn the day he arrived in the town of Mesa City. There was a puzzled expression on his face, as though at last something out of the past had made an impression upon his mind. He had the gun in his hand, balancing it with the skill of an expert, handling it with the appreciation of one who knows a fine weapon.

Sheriff Tyler held his breath. Had he been wrong, after all?

And then the old puzzled look came back on Tommy Smith's face. He let go of the gun as though it were something abhorrent. He shoved it back in the drawer and went into the kitchen.

For a long hour Sheriff Tyler sat on the porch with an unlighted pipe in his mouth, wondering. This was something else to worry him, something else to disturb his aplomb. In the past weeks the entire picture of Mesa City had been changing. Never a namby-pamby range town, the trend was constantly toward the more lawless side. There were too many gamblers in town, too many tinhorns wending their way into the place. Games of chance ceased to be games of chance and became gyp rackets. Men who for years had worn guns in a matter-of-fact way, began to pay more attention to their sidearms.

Twice the sheriff had spoken to Wade Thatcher, the proprietor of the Mesa City Palace of Chance.

"Yore place is gettin' pretty disorderly, Wade," he had warned the owner. "Better hold 'em down."

Wade Thatcher, grizzled, tight-lipped, had looked queerly at the sheriff. "I'm doin' the best I can, King, but there's too many strangers in town with nothin' to do but gamble and drink and raise hell. After all, that's yore job, ain't it?"

For the first time in years the sheriff realized that perhaps what Wade Thatcher said was true. He knew that ten years back he wouldn't have gone to Thatcher—he would have gone to Thatcher's customers and warned them in no uncertain terms.

And constantly, in the back of his mind, the sheriff carried a picture of a tall smiling youth who held a gun in his hand with a look in his eyes that belied the expression of his lips.

And then, for the first time in three years, Mesa City had a killing. It wasn't of such great importance in itself—a tinhorn gambler shot a hanger-on. It was, however, the one thing needed to fan a smoldering hell fire into flame.

The town cut wide open. Gambling stakes went higher. Men who followed the hell-towns, as carrion birds hunt for prey, flocked into the place in droves. Killings, lawlessness and vice became rampant.

Just what had led up to it, no one was able to say. Before, the sheriff had managed to avoid a direct break with the men who were running the town, led by half a dozen hell-binders from the border country. But this was showdown . . . and the sheriff backed off.

"That's the way with yuh old-timers," Rowdy Hale guffawed when he had tried

to goad the sheriff into a draw. "They give yuh a six-pointed star, an' yuh think that's all yuh need—when what yuh really need is guts. When Buck Cain gets here next week, we'll take this one-horse town apart and throw it in yore face."

STANDING at the bar with the Bar 7 men, Tommy Smith was holding a glass of soda pop in his hand when the argument between the sheriff and Rowdy Hale started. At mention of the name of Buck Cain, the glass slipped from his nerveless fingers, crashed on the floor.

Buck Cain! Memories that had lain dormant for months began stirring themselves. Who was Buck Cain? What part did he have in Tommy Smith's life? That gun! Why had it seemed in some way familiar to him? He had heard, naturally, some of the veiled talk about Tommy the Kid, and he had associated it vaguely with his clouded past—in much the same way that he associated the name of Buck Cain. Maybe Buck Cain could tell him who he really was.

Another thought suddenly sent chill fingers of fear tightening about his heart. Supposing—and he forced himself to carry the thought to its conclusion—supposing that *he* was Tommy the Kid?

He thought of Myra, of his love for her, of what it would mean to her if there should be some tie-up between his memory of Buck Cain and the past that had so completely eluded him. Faster than light, the thoughts sped through his consciousness.

He started toward the sheriff, as though to say something. Then his face went white. He turned on his heel and walked out.

"Well, what do yuh know about *that?*" one of the Bar 7 men said. "Tommy didn't side the sheriff, and him the father of the gal he—"

King Tyler, his face drawn, lined with the knowledge that for a second time he had backed down, walked out of the saloon without a word.

From that day on, a change seemed to come over Tommy Smith. He didn't go to town with the boys any more, and his visits to the sheriff's home stopped.

There was plenty of comment concerning Tommy's failure to throw in with the man whom everybody thought was going to be his father-in-law—most of it pretty unfavorable comment.

From a smiling joking rannie who was always ready for a lark, Tommy Smith turned into a taciturn clip-worded puncher whose temper was as short as his patience, and whose days seemed spent in introspective thought.

With the backdown of the sheriff, the lid went off entirely. Hell reigned twenty-four hours a day. Sheriff Tyler, well aware of the fact he could no longer hold the wild bunch in check, kept off the streets and avoided direct contact with the gunslick hellions.

And Tommy Smith stayed on the Bar 7, moody, preoccupied.

How were those who criticized him to know what was passing through his mind? How were they to know that for days and days he tried to figure out some connection between that gun in the sheriff's sideboard and that hazy memory of the name of Buck Cain? He wondered if he dared go to Buck Cain and ask him the question that was deviling the soul out of him? He wondered, perhaps feared, what he might learn of himself. What would it do to his planned life with Myra—and wasn't that all over now, anyway? Wouldn't any girl hate the man who had failed to side her father in a tight?

Buck Cain arrived in Mesa City. He was everything his henchman had claimed for him. He was a beetle-browed swaggering bully who had thrown a scare into the town within an hour of his arrival, by virtue of brawny fists and quick-shooting guns.

And still, Tommy Smith refused to leave the Bar 7. He listened to tales of Buck Cain's gun prowess, of his incredible cruelty, of his braggadocio—and wondered.

Came a day when Sheriff King Tyler, no longer able to withstand the questing glances of his townsmen, decided to make his play—win or lose. He went into the Palace of Chance deliberately to match guns with the leader of the wild bunch, Buck Cain. There was an argument, quick words, the flash of gunfire . . . and King Tyler, with a queer look on his face, the expression of a man who has played and lost and yet won in the playing, slipped slowly to the floor of the saloon—and died.

MEN who were there told afterward of the manner in which Tommy Smith received the news of King Tyler's passing. He was standing at a branding fire when a rider from town streaked across the salt flats with the word that the sheriff had been killed by Buck Cain.

Cain. Cain! The name pounded against his temples like moulten fire surging against a cauldron's edge. What did Buck Cain have to do with his past? What could Cain tell him—and would he tell him if he could?

Again and again it had seemed that in some way Buck Cain, that monogrammed gun in the sheriff's sideboard, and Tommy Smith made some kind of a triumvirate. Yet, in the days of ceaseless worrying that he had gone through, he had hesitated to try to find the answer—hesitated because of a fourth consideration, Myra Tyler.

Now King Tyler, Myra's father, the man who had helped him when he had needed help most, who had taken him for what he was—King Tyler was dead. And Myra was alone.

Men who were watching said that before Tommy Smith dropped the branding iron, the hot metal seared the flesh of his left hand—yet he seemed not to have noticed. He walked across to his horse, mounted without a word and rode off toward town.

One of the Bar 7 men shook his head. "If ever I saw hell in a man's eyes, I seen it just now," he said, and his voice was strangely repressed.

Tommy Smith rode straight to the house of King Tyler. He laid a comforting hand on the girl's bowed head, walked into the dining room, jerked open the drawer of the sideboard. The thong that had tied the holster to his leg the day he had arrived in Mesa City was still cut. He knotted the two ends with a vicious jerk.

Myra, sensing what he was doing, had followed. Fear, wide-eyed, burned in her gaze.

"Tommy!" she whispered, and her voice held a tone of awe. "Tommy, you remember—"

He looked at her with twin lines of perplexity between his eyes.

"I—I don't know, Myra," he answered, and it was the truth. "Somehow, I guess I knew how to use this once. It seems as though it used to be a part of me, a part that I—I just don't remember. Buck Cain killed your dad. And that name of Buck Cain seems to be burned into my mind along with the only part of my name I've ever been able to remember: Tommy."

He rubbed the palm of his hand across the plate of the gun.

"Maybe Buck Cain can tell me—before he dies for killin' yore dad."

Cold terror mantled her face.

"You mustn't, Tommy," she whispered. "Cain is a killer, a man known from one end of the border to the other as a cold-blooded murderer."

He cudgeled his brain, trying to think. The only thought that stood out was the fact that Cain had killed Myra's father, that there was nobody to side the sheriff,

(Continued on page 107)

Out-Trail Caravan

IT'S been a long time since Foster-Harris has spun a yarn at the *Ace-High* campfire. We've missed him. He's one old-time Westerner who has a standing invite to sit in and share our beans and jerky any time he's so minded.

He's coming back next month, with a novel of the action days in a section of the Old West he has known since boyhood. So it's, "Light an' set awhile, Foster-Harris. You're no stranger at this roundup wagon. And some of you hombres who are hogging all the room around the fire, move over and make room for a top-hand."

Just to whet your appetites, here's a chunk of "Gun Gate to Bravo Pass," the feature novel Foster-Harris has done for the next issue:

In the soft darkness of the Border night, Rip Ragsdale was riding the last mile home from Mexico. He had come up through the mouth of the old pass, through which so many wild generations of fighting men had ridden—soldiers, Texas Rangers, Comanche Indians, Conquistadores, and men unknown. To the right now was the flat grassy bench on which gray old El Tapón kept its eternal guard over the pass. El Tapón—home!

But there would be no kinsman at the home ranch to greet him. Frank Ragsdale, Rip's brother, was dead. He had been gulched and murdered, according to the letter from Judge Hammerton that had summoned Rip home. And Rip was the last of the clan.

But certainly there would be someone at the ranch. The Judge's letter had mentioned that Jess Harkness, owner of the big H-in-a-Pot spread, had been named by the court to look after the estate until Rip came home. Rip didn't like the sound of that very much, but he supposed it was all right. As far as he knew, Harkness was honest, even if he was almighty hard.

(Continued on page 106)

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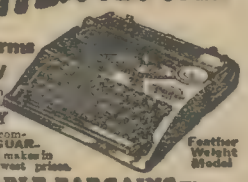

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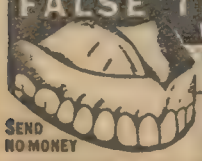

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(Continued from page 105)

Rip was climbing up out of the trail proper onto the flat now. There was a light in the front room of the big two-story stone ranchhouse. It seemed sort of dim and flickering, Rip thought absently as he drew rein.

Cow country fashion, he lifted his voice in a hail before riding on in.

"Hello-o, the house!" he called. "Anybody home?"

The light went out with a suddenness that was bleakly significant. Rip stared, puzzled. On the other side of the line he could have understood such caution. But surely, over here, there wasn't reason to be fearful, was there? With sudden suspicion, Rip swung down to the ground, before hailing again.

"Hey! It's me, Rip Ragsdale! I want to come in."

There was still no answer. But to Rip's wolf-keen ears came a sound he recognized, the faint creak of the side door. Understanding now, he dropped the reins, and whirled to the left.

"Hey, you! *Parete!* Halt!" His gun was in his hand.

This time he got a reply, a lancing streak of gunflame from the blackness beside the house. The airlash of a bullet slapped his face. . . .

Nice friendly welcome home? Not so very, but that's the way they did things in that corner of the Southwest. And Foster-Harris will tell the rest of Rip Ragsdale's grimly fascinating story, in "Gun Gate to Bravo Pass."

Also in the November issue will be a Harry F. Olmsted novelette, "Stampede Trail To Glory," and a novelette of ranch adventure by Charles W. Tyler, plus short cow-country action stories by Lloyd Eric Reeve, Gunnison Steele, Harold F. Cruickshank and others!

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THE BOOTHILL PARDON

(Continued from page 104)

and that he should have done it long ago. Why hadn't he? Why had he been afraid of this gun that now seemed so familiar?

"I'm goin' to find out, Myra," he said tightly. "I've got to know."

THIN-LIPPED, with narrowed eyes, Tommy Smith started downtown. An orgy of ribaldry pounded against his ear drums as he slid between the swinging doors of the Palace of Chance. It suddenly died to a mere rumble as the crowd glimpsed the slight form that stood just inside the doors.

There were men in that crowd who knew Tommy Smith—but did they? Could this slender cowboy with the fire of hell burning in his eyes be the Tommy Smith they had known? And that gun at his hip, the easy set of his shoulders, the cat-like balance with which he carried his weight.

Buck Cain turned, seemed to have seen a ghost.

"Good God!" he breathed, but a dozen men heard it. "Tommy the Kid!"

Tommy heard it too. It pounded against his consciousness like surging tide.

Tommy the Kid! At last he had the answer. He was Tommy the Kid! No longer did he fear Buck Cain. No longer did he fear anybody. He was Tommy the Kid, the man whose gun-speed was invincible. All these last months of peace, of quiet, seemed to be suddenly wiped away as though by a rushing freshet, and stark gunsmoke reality took their place.

Now he remembered. Hot stabbing lances of powder flame, whining bullets, men dropping under guns that roared with

(Continued on page 108)

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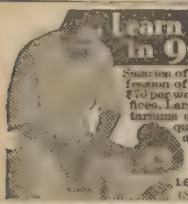

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(Continued from page 107)

the melodies of hell. . . . They were his life!

There was no Myra Tyler now, there was nothing but a realization of gun supremacy, the fact that before him stood the one man he hated more than anything else in the world. He remembered Cain now, all right. He remembered how he had gotten the crease on his temple that nearly ended his life. Buck Cain had put it there. Buck Cain had tried to gun him from behind—and missed. Then, fearing for his life, Cain had fled.

Suddenly Buck Cain found himself standing alone, a black-browed man with twin guns swung low. Men knew without a word that this was showdown. Nothing was said—nothing was needed. Tommy Smith's eyes were slitted and his lips drawn back over even teeth in a grin that told the crowd to stand back from the line of fire.

Buck Cain's gun cleared leather before Tommy's right hand flashed for the Colt at his thigh. Yet Tommy's was the first to roar. It bucked against his wrist even in the upward swing, and a red blotch appeared where the bridge of Buck Cain's nose had been. Cain's gun, still in the upswing, dropped from his lifeless fingers.

But the pay-off was not to be as simple as that. Half a dozen men, who had sided Cain through all his gun fights since his arrival from the South, came in, guns flashing. They sought to cut down Tommy Smith by sheer force of numbers.

The slim figure of Tommy Smith was here, there, everywhere, like a wraith. Every time he paused, the gun in his hand lanced flame—and another one of the Cain gang went sprawlingly to meet his maker.

A .45 slug caught Tommy in the left shoulder. The impact of the bullet swung him halfway around. He grinned through bloody lips that were stained crimson from a wound in his cheek.

With the fourth man down, the others hesitated. Men who had laid hands on gun butts suddenly found themselves thinking better of it, and moved out of the line of fire.

Tommy Smith was glad. He didn't want to be forced to kill these others. But he counted without treachery. A man who had been shot crawled behind a battered old piano in one corner, dragged himself half erect and leveled his gun across the end of the keyboard.

Tommy saw the gun a split second ahead of the lancing flame from the barrel. But not soon enough! A bloody furrow smeared itself across his temple. There was a quick relaxing of his set grin, and Tommy Smith went to the floor in a crumpled heap.

WADE THATCHER and the local men who stood for law and order in the town figured it was time to move in, and they did. When the smoke of battle cleared away, the backbone of the hellion clan was broken.

It was a quirk of fate that the same board on which Tommy had come into the sheriff's office now served to take him out of the Palace of Chance.

Myra Tyler shoved her way through the crowd. "Take him to my house," she insisted. "Doc Adams! Send for him—"

But there were those in the crowd who had heard the exclamation of Buck Cain before he died.

"He's Tommy the Kid," they said, in awe-struck whispers.

Wade Thatcher, head of the vigilantes now, looked from one to the other of the half dozen men crowded around.

"Whoever he is, whether he's plain Tommy Smith or Tommy the Kid," he announced flatly, "this town owes him a debt it can't never pay. He did more in three minutes to put law back into Mesa

(Continued on page 110)

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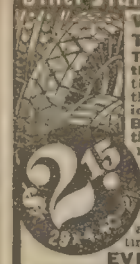

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[illegible]x3½	$2.35	$0.[illegible]
[illegible]x4	2.95	1.[illegible]
[illegible]x4	2.95	1.25
[illegible]x4	2.95	1.25
[illegible]x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.40

Size	Tires	Tubes
[illegible]x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
[illegible]x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
34x5	3.95	1.75

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
[illegible]x5	$4.25	$1.[illegible]
[illegible]x6	8.95	1.[illegible]
[illegible]x6	4.25	2.[illegible]
32x6	7.95	2.[illegible]
36x6	9.95	4.4[illegible]

Size	Tires	Tubes
34x7	$10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
[illegible].00-20	$3.75	1.[illegible]
[illegible].50-20	4.45	1.9[illegible]
7.00-20	5.95	2.9[illegible]

Size	Tires	Tubes
[illegible].00-20	$6.95	$3.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
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9.75-20	13.95	6.45

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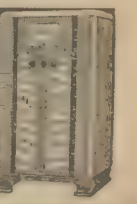

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Cash for unused U. S. Stamps at 90% face value. Plymouth, Dept. PP, 152 West 42nd, New York.

(Continued from page 109)

City than ten men could have done in months."

One of the men standing beside the silent form of Tommy Smith shook his head.

"I don't reckon this town'll ever get a chance to pay its debt," he opined solemnly. "He's goin'—fast."

"He's not—he's not!" Myra insisted. "Oh *why* doesn't Doc hurry?"

Doc Adams was there then. He took one apprehensive look and had Tommy carried to the sheriff's house, a block away.

There were those who celebrated the return of law and order to the town of Mesa City by drinking and hoorawing. There were a few who waited expectantly on the porch of the sheriff's house for the judgment of Doc Adams.

It was nearly an hour before he came out, his sallow face serious, drawn.

"Tommy Smith—or Tommy the Kid, whoever he was," he said, "is dead."

"By tarnation, it *was* him," ejaculated someone. "Hell for Betsy! Imagine—right here in Mesa County, an' never even packed a gun."

Doc Turner and Randy Thomas, who was Myra's cousin, arranged the funeral. They buried the kid in the cemetery back of the Baptist Church.

And that night many a glass was lifted to the memory of Tommy the Kid, who gunned the town of Mesa City back to law and order, and checked out doing it.

Myra Tyler left town. They said she had gone to visit an uncle back East.

The same night of the Kid's funeral, a buckboard loaded with blankets moved carefully down through Indian Canyon and out toward the railroad. Doc Adams handled the reins.

"One of the boys off the Arrow Diamond got a busted leg," he told the station agent who flagged the train. "Takin' him to Cedar City."

But the doc didn't take the man with

the busted leg to Cedar City. He took him to a secluded cottage in a distant town where a girl with hair the color of wheat in autumn opened the door for them. Doc and the girl watched at the man's bedside day and night for the next three weeks.

Finally the doc went away. Before he left he had a long talk with Myra Tyler, and Myra handed him a piece of stained paper.

"I found it in the boot dad took off him the day he came to Mesa," she said.

It was an old reward poster and bore the legend:

WANTED

TOMMY THE KID

The doc read it several times before he got back to Mesa City. Then he tore it up carefully and threw it away.

The man who had been Tommy Smith opened his eyes questioningly and stared at the slim blonde girl beside his bed.

"Hello," he said simply. "Who are you?"

"I'm Myra," she answered, with a tightening in her throat as she saw it meant nothing to him. "Know me?"

"No, ma'am," he answered; and then, hopefully, "but I'd like to."

"What's your name?" she asked, and the words were taut.

"Gosh, I don't know! Tommy, I guess."

"You've had a bad accident, Tommy. You'll have to start your whole life over again. The doctor says your memory is destroyed. Do you like me? I'll teach you everything you need to know and—"

"Why, of course I like you." And then with an odd smile, "Shouldn't I?"

"You should," she said firmly. "I'm your wife. But if you don't remember it, maybe we'll have to be married all over again. Now go to sleep and try to get well."

And Tommy Smith, with a peaceful smile, obeyed.

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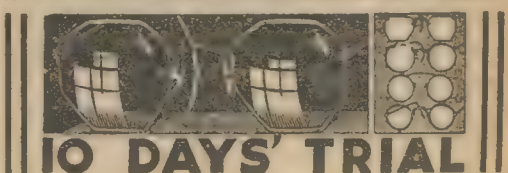

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